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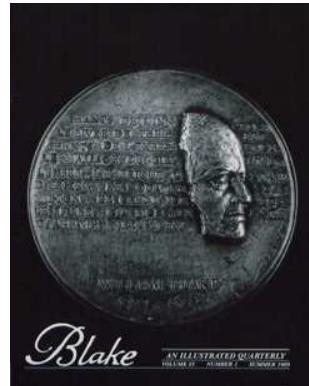
# BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jerome J. McGann, Social Values and Poetic Acts

Michael Fischer

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<sup>78</sup>Rainsford Papers, British Museum Add. MSS. 23,670, f.71; *Monthly Observer and New Church Record* 3 (Jan.–Dec. 1859): 281. Benamore's son was also a physician and student of Mainaduc.

<sup>79</sup>Cowper, *Letters* 3: 404.

<sup>80</sup>Arthur Barnett, "Solomon Bennett, 1761–1838: Artist, Hebraist, and Controversialist," *Transactions of Jewish Historical Society of England* 17 (1951–52): 91–111.

<sup>81</sup>Solomon Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 2nd. ed. (London: printed for the author and sold by him at No. 475, Strand, 1812) iv–v.

<sup>82</sup>Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe* (Harvard UP, 1970) 27–53.

<sup>83</sup>Antoine Faivre, *Mystiques, Théosophes et Illuminés au Siècle des Lumières* (New York: Georg Olms, 1976) 175–90. Fuseli owned Lavater's *Reise nach Copenhagen* and was working on a biography of his friend in the early 1800s.

<sup>84</sup>Gershom Scholem, *Du frankisme au jacobinisme* (Paris: Galimard, 1981) 28.

<sup>85</sup>S. Kirchstein, *Juedische Graphiker* (Berlin, 1918) 20.

<sup>86</sup>Katz 27–53; Bennett, *Constancy* 224–25.

<sup>87</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 216.

<sup>88</sup>G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 165; Rubens, "Anglo-Jewish" 114.

<sup>89</sup>Bentley 17; British Museum Catalogue entry for Stockdale edition.

<sup>90</sup>Bennett 96; Bennett, *Constancy* 5, 228.

<sup>91</sup>Handlist of Cosway's library.

<sup>92</sup>Bennett 94.

<sup>93</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 34, 206.

<sup>94</sup>Handlist of Cosway's library.

<sup>95</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 34, 206.

<sup>96</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 105–06.

<sup>97</sup>E 171; J. M. Bogan, "Apocalypse Now: William Blake and the Conversion of the Jews," *English Language Notes* 19 (1981): 117.

<sup>98</sup>See entry on "William Blake" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

<sup>99</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 200.

<sup>100</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 106–09.

<sup>101</sup>Bennett, *Constancy* 77.

<sup>102</sup>E 769; "Police . . . Astrology," *Oracle and True Briton* (13 Oct. 1807).

<sup>103</sup>*The Supernatural Magazine* (Dublin, 1809) 7–9.

<sup>104</sup>*The Supernatural Magazine* 67–71.

<sup>105</sup>Richard Carlile, ed., *The Republican*, 12 (1825): 469. Bennett became the close friend of the Duke of Sussex, who, as Grand Master from 1813 on, struggled to maintain Jewish rights within Freemasonry and to suppress the exclusively Christian Rosicrucian degrees.

<sup>106</sup>Solomon Bennett, *The Temple of Ezekiel* (London, 1824) 151.

<sup>107</sup>Barnett 96.

<sup>108</sup>See Morton D. Paley, "'Wonderful Originals'—Blake and Ancient Sculpture," in *Blake in His Time*, eds. R. N. Essick and D. Pearce (Indiana UP, 1978) 183–92.

<sup>109</sup>Bennett, *Temple* 5.

<sup>110</sup>Bentley 273, 136, 232.

<sup>111</sup>William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper's, 1892) 1:115–20.

<sup>112</sup>Sheila Spector, *Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Garland, 1984) xi; Swedenborg's *Journal of Dreams and Spiritual Diary* *passim*.

<sup>113</sup>Frank Podmore, *From Mesmer to Christian Science* (New York: University Books, 1963) 258.

<sup>114</sup>Bentley 180.

<sup>115</sup>Bentley 229, 236.

<sup>116</sup>W. M. Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers* (London, 1903) 171–72.

<sup>117</sup>Bentley 180.

<sup>118</sup>William Spence, *Essays in Divinity and Physic* (London: Robert Hindmarsh, 1792) 58.

<sup>119</sup>Rainsford Papers, British Museum Add. MSS. 23, 670, vol. 2.f.275.

<sup>120</sup>Chastanier 31.

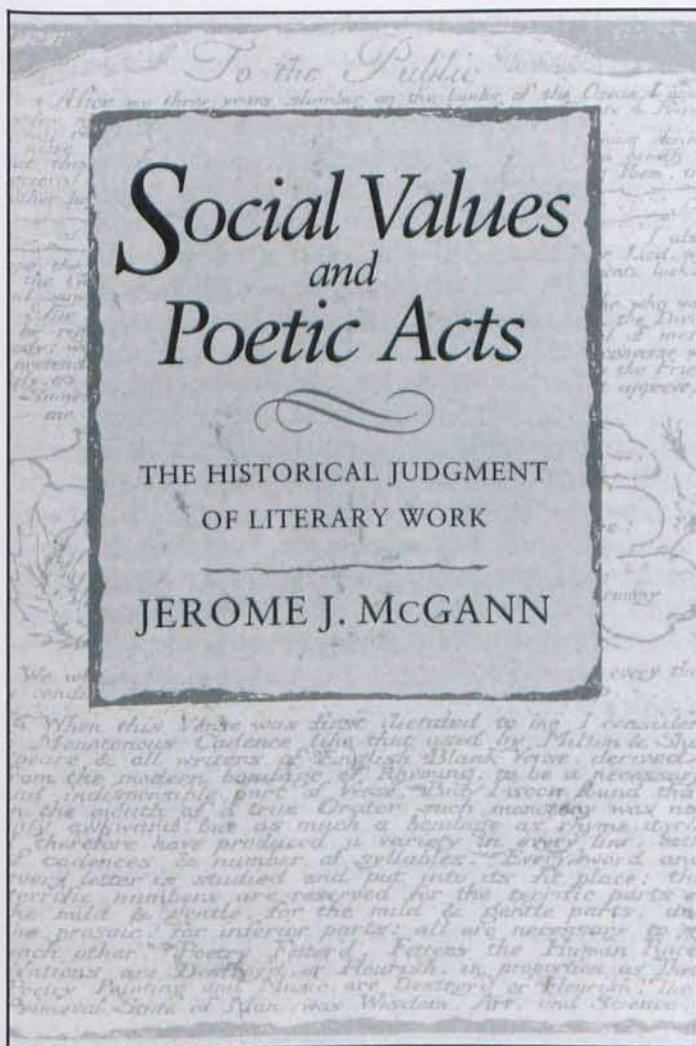
## REVIEWS

**Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and the Poetic Acts*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988. xii + 279 pp. \$25.**

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

*Social Values and Poetic Acts* is the fourth in an important series of books that includes *The Romantic Ideology* and *A Critique of Textual Criticism* (both published in 1983) and *The Beauty of Inflections* (1985). (McGann has not yet said when the fifth and final installment, *The Literature of Knowledge*, will appear.) These books all aim at restoring historical consciousness to literary studies. Although the English romantics have figured in this project from the beginning, in *Social Values and Poetic Acts* Blake is especially important to McGann's argument. Part 1 of the book, with its four chapters addressed to the deconstructionists, the new historicists, the formalists, and the marxists, respectively, is of course patterned after *Jerusalem*, and what McGann calls Blake's "habit of returning to the same topics from slightly altered perspectives" (ix) influences the method of the several chapters that follow.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Blake's intervention in the "legitimation crisis of art" (x) of his own time guides McGann's response to the problem of revitalizing literary study today. Even the dust jacket of the book reproduces a plate from *Jerusalem*. Understanding why Blake has become so important to McGann sheds light not only on *Social Values and Poetic Acts* but on the series of books that it extends.

Although discussed in *The Romantic Ideology*, Blake is peripheral to that book's larger concerns and figures mainly as an example of the first, optimistic phase of romanticism, when the promise of the French Revolution could still be believed. Because politics was still "a pleasant exercise of hope and joy," as Wordsworth described this period in *The Prelude*, radical works like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* could be exempt from



the self-criticism and anxiety that trouble later works like the *Lyrical Ballads*, not to mention the nihilism, cynicism, and despair that overtake still later works by Byron and Shelley. McGann may feel that his own historical moment has more in common with Shelley's England in 1819 (with its "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know / But leech-like to their fainting country cling") than with Europe in the early 1790s (when, again to quote Wordsworth, "mighty were the auxiliars which then stood / Upon our side, we who were strong in love!").<sup>2</sup> In any case, Blake's understandably confident affirmation of change was less interesting to McGann in 1983 than the other romantics' response to political disappointment.

Blake's enviable historical position protects him from McGann's ambivalent assessment of the other romantics in *The Romantic Ideology*, especially Wordsworth.<sup>3</sup> According to McGann, Wordsworth's poetry typically takes up serious social problems—in "The Ruined Cottage," for example, the collapse of the cottage weaving industry and in "Tintern Abbey" the

newly impoverished and uprooted rural poor that frequented the ruined abbey. After acknowledging these problems, Wordsworth tries to evade or displace them. In "The Ruined Cottage" he changes the subject from the economic plight of the weaver's family to the natural deterioration of the family's neglected cottage, with the plants, weeds, and flowers (agents of what Wordsworth calls "the calm oblivious tendencies of nature") growing over the cottage and virtually incorporating it into the landscape. In "Tintern Abbey," the smoke from "the vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" similarly blends in with the natural setting, almost like a cloud or breeze. Action gives way to peaceful contemplation, as painful historical realities yield to consoling natural processes, allowing the speaker in "The Ruined Cottage" to

Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
She [Margaret] sleeps in the calm earth, and peace  
is here.

In "Tintern Abbey," the social crisis signified by transients and displaced persons—not to mention the failure of the French Revolution to remedy such inequality, which has to haunt a visit taking place the eve of Bastille Day—also dissolves into a tranquil setting that Wordsworth can observe "with an eye made quiet."

All of the romantics are subjected to this kind of analysis in *The Romantic Ideology*, again with the exception of Blake. Because Blake could still hope for political solutions, he presumably did not have to avoid social problems. Attacking God & his Priest & King could give Blake the satisfaction Wordsworth pursued in contemplating the "calm earth." But if Blake thus stands outside the evasions that tempt the other romantics, he also misses out on what McGann sees as their heroism. Although McGann repeatedly charges these poets with avoiding social realities, he is not attacking them, as some of his detractors have felt, but redefining what makes their poetry great. Their artistic successes come when they recognize the failure of their own attempts to escape history—when they see that nothing makes up for their political frustration, not musing on nature in solitude, not even writing poetry. Sometimes McGann pictures these poets as unwillingly suffering the exposure of their most cherished illusions. But more often he praises these writers for courageously struggling with the contradictions that attend their futile dreams of escape. In different ways, these writers all end up admitting that the fancy cannot cheat so well as they had wished.<sup>4</sup> They are great poets not because of their spurious consolations but because they refuse to be consoled. They remain dissatisfied with a harsh world that they feel cannot be avoided.

McGann is much harder on twentieth-century critics of romanticism than he is on the romantics themselves. These writers, especially, it seems, M. H. Abrams, mistake the romantics' wishes for achievements. In the guise of respecting the romantics' intentions, twentieth-century critics shy away from these writers' agonizing self-criticism. In academic criticism, as McGann describes it, a poetic tale (the ability of romantic poetry to transcend or otherwise make up for political pain) becomes a costly form of worship: costly, because "to generate a polemic for Romantic poetry on its own ideological terms is to vitiate criticism and to court mere intellectual sentiment."<sup>5</sup> Encouraging the sentimental illusion that poetry can compensate for political disappointment shortchanges these poets' critiques of their own evasions or, what is the same thing, obscures their heroic refusal to settle for anything less than a better society. By failing to see that the poets "keep [their] sorrow to the end," critics like Abrams encourage us to minimize our disappointment in our world, even to think that contemplating romantic poetry is abundant recompense for our own political grievances.<sup>6</sup> These "priests and clerics of Romanticism" thus vitiate criticism of a world that we ought to change. They refuse to admit that "Wordsworth's truth," for example, "is darker, more intransigent, more *faithful*" to a future that still has not arrived.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Blake stays marginal to McGann's critique of romanticism in *The Romantic Ideology*, Blake's critics are also exempt from this harsh attack on academic criticism. Northrop Frye, arguably the chief priest of romantic scholarship, is not even mentioned. These gaps begin to be filled in McGann's next two books, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* and *The Beauty of Inflections*, which set the stage for Blake's emergence as a central figure in *Social Values and Poetic Acts*. In *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* and in several of the essays collected in *Inflections*, McGann argues for healing the rift between what the "new critics" called scholarship and criticism, or what he terms textual and interpretive studies. By attending to the words on the page and ignoring how they got there, the new critics reinforced the romantic illusion that a poem is timeless (as immutable as print) and autonomous (intelligible apart from its genesis and reception). McGann suggests that modern textual scholarship, instead of contesting these illusions, has left them intact by doing its work and then getting out of the way, its work being to establish once and for all the definitive text. The "definitive text" is arrived at by heed-ing the final intention of the individual author and fil-tering out the "accidentals" or corruptions introduced by printers, editors, and other external forces.

McGann uses Blake to expose what these myths hide, namely, that every work emerges from a series of negotiations involving the individual author with publishers, printers, editors, distributors, booksellers, and even reviewers. Blake brings to light these negotiations by trying to circumvent them, by, in effect, aspiring "to become a literary institution unto himself."<sup>8</sup> The several different versions of works like *Jerusalem*, moreover, highlight the difficulties involved in fixing a definitive text: "In reality, there is no such Text; there are only texts, of various kinds, prepared by various people (some by the author), at various periods, for particular and various purposes."<sup>9</sup> McGann is not so much describing *Jerusalem* here as using it to unsettle distinctions between accidental and substantive variations, preliminary and final intentions. For him, all poems are social acts that bear the imprint of a particular place and time. It follows that textual scholarship ought to play a primary rather than a preliminary role in interpretation. Seemingly accidental intrusions or irrelevant, extrinsic considerations — the price of a book or the place of publication — help constitute literary meaning.

Although Blake assists McGann in making this argument, Byron does, too, by vigorously taking part in the dialogue with reviewers, publishers, and booksellers that McGann wants to highlight. In theory at least, any poet would do because all literary works illustrate the interpretive importance of historical scholarship. McGann accordingly uses works by a wide range of poets, among them Coleridge, Keats, Christina Rossetti, and Tennyson, to underscore the necessity of historical criticism.

*A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* and *The Beauty of Inflections* could have been written without Blake, but in *Social Values and Poetic Acts* he is indispensable. Much of this book continues the critique of academic criticism begun in *The Romantic Ideology*. Here, however, McGann turns from self-described traditionalists like Abrams to the poststructuralists who claim to have superseded them, in particular Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Stanley Fish. McGann's critique repeats a familiar, but still important, litany: post-structuralists neglect the historical and social dimensions of literary works ("For all its use of language," McGann complains, literature in de Man "has little to say or do beyond itself" [104]); perpetuate the new critics' myopic obsession with immanent interpretation or close reading ("The enemy which deconstructive critics like Miller will not face is history, and the fault line of such criticism appears as its elision of the sociohistorical dimensions of literary work" [121]); preach what is finally an "entirely benevolent and conservative" message (109–10) (in different ways, both "Fish's inconsequence" and "de Man's nihilism" "preserve and justify the known

world of literary criticism" [109]); and exacerbate the legitimization crisis currently facing literary study. "What is so special about those *literary* labyrinths guarded so cunningly by the professors" (97)? Why not concentrate on cybernetic systems that are equally challenging to the imagination and more useful in practical terms? "What possible use can a literary education serve"—a literary education defined as free play—"other than to train other [unneeded] literary persons" (97)? These are excellent questions. For McGann, the inability of poststructuralists to answer them contributes to the marginality of literary studies today.

Despite these accusations, de Man and Fish fare better in this book than Abrams did in *The Romantic Ideology*. McGann credits poststructuralism with debunking the self-serving myths of totalization, continuity, and finality that our culture has fostered and with being alert to the contradictions that disrupt literary works. De Man and Fish, moreover, rightly attack a crudely referential picture of language in which words mirror preexistent things or facts.<sup>10</sup> McGann tries to turn this attack into an opportunity, not to expunge the referential dimensions of poetry (as Miller and de Man apparently do) but to reconceive them along lines laid down by the historical critics and philologists of the recent past.

Other critics have brought similar charges against deconstruction, but McGann is the first to draw on Milman Parry and other historical critics in fashioning his alternative to deconstruction as well as to the traditional humanism that deconstruction challenges. The view of literature and literary criticism that results is impressive. McGann variously describes both literary works and critical texts as events, acts, activities, and social practices; their truth depends on what they do—the human interests that they serve. From this point of view, a poet intervenes in history, acting on behalf of certain values or ideologies. Poetic discourse, however, compels the poet to flesh out these ideologies and to make them concrete, thereby preventing the poet (as opposed to the propagandist) from simply promoting them intact: "literary forms do not permit the archive of knowledge to be reduced to the abstractness of proverbs or the illusions of ideology. Literary forms deploy such abstractions and illusions all the time, but they dispel these ghostly shapes by transforming them into recognizable human forms: by incarnating them in worlds that are detailed, specific, and circumstantial" (107). The details of literary works—the minute particulars that might appear in an anthology footnote, for instance—prove to be incommensurate with the ideologies that would master them. Poets thus cannot do without detail (and still write poetry); neither can they do with particulars what they would like (enforce certain ideologies). By including inevitably re-

calcitrant historical particulars, "the poetic performs a critical function which is not found in other forms of discourse" (82).

Poetic performativity overtakes and finally overcomes ideological performativity as the poetic strives to thicken and realize the entirety of the communicative field. Unlike predicative and propositional discourse, poetry is obliged, as it were, to represent all sides of a question. . . . Imaginative discourse does not stand apart from norms, imperatives, and ideologies. Operating in modes of representation, the poetic acts to display truth as a function of lived realities rather than formal relations or empirical correlations. For this reason one must say that, of all forms of communication, the poetic alone entails the *whole* of what is true; and this is the case because in the domain of the poetic—the domain of Imagination and Memory—all the details, and all the forms through which those details are known, remain conceptually free, remain open to their own discovery. (91–92)

"Only imaginative work does this," this inclusion of detail that subverts the work's ideological design on its reader: "*et tout le reste est idéologie*" (114).

It follows for McGann that critics who elide a work's details defuse its critical power. Glossing over the work's historical particulars takes many forms, among them insisting on the work's timelessness (thus allegorizing its details into illustrations of eternal truths) and celebrating the work's supposed autonomy (making what has to be footnoted irrelevant). Reinforcing a point first made against Abrams in *The Romantic Ideology*, McGann holds that any "thematizing hermeneutics which does not emphasize the sociohistorical particularities of the literary ideas and knowledge which it deploys runs a grave risk . . . of reproducing ideology rather than literature" (107). The canonical texts of Western culture—the Bible, Plato's dialogues, and Herodotus's *Histories* are a few of McGann's examples—become especially important not because they represent transhistorical values (as conservatives would have it) but because their remoteness is as hard to overlook as the editorial annotations that must now accompany them. "The footnote historicizes what the scholar is doing. It alerts the reader to the fact that what we call knowledge is not a corpus of information but a series of knowing acts that have been and are carried out under particular circumstances" (54)—and in the service of certain ideologies that McGann wants scholars always to examine.

McGann, in effect, does for the classics here what he did for the romantics in *The Romantic Ideology*. The immersion of ancient texts in history, not their alleged timelessness, makes them great. He similarly praises a modernist text like *The Cantos* for letting time and circumstance "play havoc with its most cherished illusions" (238), for being "littered with incommensurate materials" (240). The honesty of Pound the poet offsets the blindness of Pound the ideologue: "Pound's exposure of European and American imperialism loses none of its

*objective truth because it comes from a source that is in so many ways repellent and blind*" (239). While I agree with this exoneration of Pound and the classics, I would be interested in knowing what (if any) canonical text fails McGann's test for literary greatness and what (if any) non-canonical text passes it. I share McGann's wish to rescue the canon from "those who would use it to propagate retrograde ideas and social values" (viii). But he risks sounding as if the present literary archive (read against the grain) were all we need to know.<sup>11</sup>

The view of literature and criticism that I have been sketching shows McGann's indebtedness not only to historical criticism but to the formalist theories he is criticizing. Like the new critics, he privileges poetry, or at least great poetry, as the one kind of discourse that frustrates ideology. In "Poetry: A Note in Ontology" (1934) and "Criticism as Pure Speculation" (1941), John Crowe Ransom also wrote of the "huge wealth of local detail" in poetry, the "context of lively local details" that a good poem develops, and "the [poet's] excursions into particularity" that "give, in spite of the argument, which would seem to be perfectly self-sufficient, a sense of the real density and contingency of the world in which arguments and plans have to be pursued." Substituting "ideologue" for "moralist" or "prophet of idealism" in the following passage by Ransom yields something remarkably close to McGann's own point of view:

The moralist, the scientist, and the prophet of idealism think evidently that they must establish their conclusions in poetry, though they reach these conclusions upon quite other evidence. The poetry is likely to destroy the conclusions with a sort of death by drowning, if it is a free poetry.

A "free poetry" presumably leaves its details as "conceptually free" as possible, to borrow a phrase from McGann noted earlier.<sup>12</sup>

McGann, of course, takes this freedom a step further than Ransom, letting the poem's particulars not only drown its theme or argument but shatter its organic unity. A poem for Ransom moves against the resistance of its details but toward a point of rest that it finally earns.<sup>13</sup> For McGann, there is no point of rest: a poem finally comes apart and its implosion lays bare the heterogeneous world that Ransom thinks poetry can tame. In departing from the new criticism, McGann shows his respect for de Man and Derrida, not only their critique of organic form but their willingness to play off what a poem declares against what a poet intends to say. The classic deconstructionist dictum along these lines is Derrida's remark in *Of Grammatology*:

the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to

a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses.<sup>14</sup>

Putting "world" in place of "language" again results in something quite close to McGann's own point of view: the writer writes in a world whose conflict-ridden history his ideology cannot dominate absolutely. A reading must always aim at a certain asymmetry, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the historical detail that he uses. Particular facts turn out to be as unruly as tropes.

Modifying Derrida's statement this way suggests that we can distinguish facts from tropes and get outside language to history. To his credit, McGann realizes that these are controversial assumptions. "History" is not for him a magic wand that makes deconstructive doubts vanish. He concedes that all knowledge—history included—is mediated by language (116) and by the social circumstances of the observer (96). He nevertheless can say that "true criticism entails a self-conscious response to certain social and historical factors; it is a function of an objective state of affairs rather than a set of verbal configurations" (149) and he can confidently appeal to "the actual, the whole, the objective truth" (230). Sometimes he sounds more cautious (or less positivistic), as when he notes that "the 'referent' of any discourse . . . cannot be simply conceived as an empirical datum" (125). But he seems to want to have his facts—and problematize them, too. Whether he can have it both ways depends on how we take a passage like the following, his most explicit treatment of the problem:

There is a knowledge through the incommensurate which is a positive knowledge and which has its roots in the ancient understanding of the memorial function of poetic discourse. To understand this more clearly, however, we shall have to explore further the structure of knowledge through incommensurability. We shall find that incommensurates are not "facts"—or what Coleridge called "objects as objects"—they are details which already carry or imply those contexts of competing human interests by which meaning is constituted. At the dawning of the incommensurate we come to understand the human world is not made up of "facts" and/or "interpretations," it is made up of events—specific and worlded engagements in which meaning is rendered and used. Poetic work locates one type of event. Its special function is to display the eventuality of meaning through representations of the incommensurable. (72)

For me at least, the strained emphasis on *events* does not so much solve the problem of claiming positive knowledge for poetry as underscore it. Perhaps McGann is deferring further exploration of this admittedly difficult question to *The Literature of Knowledge*, the final volume in this series.

I am less patient with McGann's essentialist talk of "the poetic," "literary forms," "poetic performativity," and "poetic work," which runs through nearly all of the

statements by him that I have been quoting. *Social Values and Poetic Acts* is full of flat statements about "authentic literary work" (112), "all poetical discourse" (240), and "all poetry" (230). (I am tempted to add "poetry as such" or "poetry qua poetry": McGann can sound so much like T. S. Eliot.) In these remarks "poetry" or "poetic discourse" seems static, defined (by McGann) once and for all. McGann faults Frye's *Anatomy* for its "neglect of the historicality of literary practice: in fact, his resort to certain conceptual categories which are assumed to be transhistorical" (14). But only a few pages earlier McGann himself makes poetry a transhistorical conceptual category, when he unequivocally defines the "distinctive character" of "poetry" as "discourse deploying a form of total coherence—and thereby a hope of coherence—within the quotidian world . . ." (9).

I am not sure whether McGann is being inconsistent in these passages or whether we should always take "poetry" as being under some tacit form of historical erasure in his writing. (Derrida, of course, has run into a similar problem with "metaphysical" terms like "center" or "origin," which he can neither avoid nor use with a straight face.) In any case, something comparable to these apparent lapses into formalism or idealism recurs in his treatment of Blake. Opposing Blake to Kant, McGann praises Blake for developing "an activist and contestatory poetics" (42). By foregrounding its own production, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* carries out this aggressive poetics. The poem reveals itself "as a specific deed of imagination—mind not in meditation but in action, and with its acts located in a particular socio-historical frame of reference" (44). Implicitly criticizing Kantian disinterestedness, Blake further shows in *Milton* that "truth is a function, not a possession, and it merges in the dialectics of serious intellectual commitments" (47). In addition, the instabilities built into *The Book of Urizen* and the consequent difficulty of settling on a definitive text reflect Blake's attempt to parody Genesis along lines opened up by historical criticism of the Bible and by Alexander Geddes in particular (171). Finally, Blake's experiments with "nonnarrative" in *The Marriage* and "antinarrative" in *Milton* show his interest in subverting "the imperialism of narrativity" (205). In all these ways, "Blake's judgments . . . went far beyond those of other artists of his time" (232): "Blake's work is exactly a prophecy against empire, a model of how the poetic moves against the perpetuation of empires and toward the development of less exploitative societies, less alienated imaginations" (230).

Everything that McGann says here about Blake jibes with what he has already said. But he neglects to mention Blake's fortunate historical position, his writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, be-

fore the promise of the French Revolution had soured. According to *The Romantic Ideology*, Blake's confidence in poetry as a radical act derived in part from the mighty auxiliars which then stood on his side. Blake did not question his activist poetics because he did not have to: his prophecy against empire seemed on the verge of coming true.

Disengaging Blake's work from that dawn allows McGann to draw some misleading parallels between Blake's art and "postmodernism," in particular the recent "Content" exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and the work of the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. These parallels are based on formal or stylistic affinities—a shared commitment to antinarrative, for example—that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers charge with subversive political meaning. Formal experimentation contributes to social change, or so these writers have argued in several manifestos and reviews that McGann quotes.

I unfortunately see very little evidence that the "textual activism" (210) of these writers is having the political consequences that they desire.<sup>15</sup> The modest (at best) political impact of this writing is at odds with its radical aspirations. Instead of analyzing this problem, McGann sympathetically focuses on these writers' statements of intent—the very mistake he accuses Abrams of making with the English romantics.<sup>16</sup> In *Social Values and Poetic Acts*, poetic tales (the activist claims of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets) again become forms of worship, or at least objects of uncritical attention. From a historicist point of view, McGann makes things worse instead of better when he notes that "empires are maintained by imperial intellects" (230). By slighting the role played by military and economic power, McGann exaggerates the vulnerability of empires to the intellectual warfare carried on by writers like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Picturing our manacles as (only) mind-forged encourages McGann to take these writers' militancy at face value.

McGann handles "Blake's distinctly nonradical reception history" (233) in a similarly disappointing way. Much of what I am implying about the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets McGann says about Blake, for McGann "the most ineffectual of [the romantic] period's many angels" (232). According to McGann, "no one had less influence on his age than Blake, and it was not until many decades after his death that he began to gather a public. And now he is [only?] an academic subject, central to the curriculum" (232). In analyzing what went wrong, McGann puts some of the blame on Blake for being "first and last a Christian" and thus opening his work "to those clerical interpretations which survive in the valley of their saying, which make nothing happen beyond what has been established as possible or acceptable" (234). ("We should not be surprised, therefore,

that Blake asked to have the Anglican service read at his funeral in 1827" [233].)<sup>17</sup> In addition, although Blake aimed at short-circuiting the "machineries of mercantile capitalism" (233), his works have been so expensive that only "rich people and art connoisseurs" have been interested in owning them and so elliptical that only the privileged interpreters of "Blake Studies" (234) have been interested in decoding them. Blake's projects have had, "from the outset, small purchase among those who would be most interested in carrying out such social transformations" (233). Blake, like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, thus "looked forward to the advent of a New Jerusalem." But, in Blake's case, "it did not come. The violent would bear it away, and Blake would play his part in the closet dramas of the academy and the struggles in the auction salesrooms" (232).

This explanation of Blake's fate sounds too simple to me, but I am most troubled by McGann's again saying nothing about Blake's initially promising historical moment or, rather, saying only that "the violent" took it away. In this account, Blake's aspirations appear as hopeless as jamming the awesome machinery of industrial capitalism. His defeat seems as inevitable as the high price of his works. Little wonder that modernist writers went on to conclude that poetry makes nothing happen and to compare the poet to "a trifling, impertinent, vexatious thing, a tumbler who has unrolled his carpet in the way of a marching army," as Yeats, one of Blake's most serious readers, put it.<sup>18</sup> It is also not surprising that literature for de Man, as McGann represents his work, has little to say or do beyond itself (104): that would seem to be the moral of Blake's incarceration in the academy and auction room.

In Yeats and the English romantics (if not in de Man) pessimistic observations about the political powerlessness of literature oscillate with desperate, or at least unsubstantiated, tributes to unacknowledged poet-legislators and "solitary men in moments of contemplation" making and unmaking "mankind, and even the world itself," again to quote Yeats.<sup>19</sup> Much the same thing happens in *Social Values and Poetic Acts* when McGann leaps from Blake's disappointing fate to the activism of the writers he has influenced, among them the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and, in criticism, McGann himself. McGann dedicates this book to his children, advising them (and us) "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." But a firm persuasion that a thing is so does not make it so, except perhaps in ages of imagination when poets have political help. Many (not just de Man) are still not capable of a firm persuasion of anything and McGann needs to analyze why.<sup>20</sup> I am not asking him to abandon his optimism, only to earn it. How can a poetics anchored in Blake avoid sinking with him into the seminar room?

<sup>17</sup>These chapters include such already published essays as "Ulysses as a Postmodern Work," "Some Forms of Critical Discourse," "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake and Dr. Alexander Geddes," and "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes." The first four chapters of the book are expanded versions of the Alexander Lectures McGann delivered at the University of Toronto in 1986. The book reads like a collection of interrelated but self-contained essays. In his preface, McGann justifies the book's "disciplined discontinuities" (ix) by appealing to the example of *Jerusalem*.

<sup>18</sup>McGann's political feelings come across most forcefully in "Thoughts after *The Romantic Ideology*," a paper he delivered at an MLA convention session. After noting that "forms of domination and exploitation have not been mitigated with the passage of the 20th century," he calls the present a "scene of wretchedness," "a world of vast and tragic social exploitation and personal alienation which is played out in literally millions of particular human lives." I thank Jerome McGann for providing me with a typescript of this paper.

<sup>19</sup>McGann hints at a distinction between early, "primary" works like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and later "revisionist" ones like *Jerusalem*, but he is most interested in placing Blake in the first phase of romanticism: "Works of this kind [i.e., Blake's]—they are rare in the period—I would call 'primary' because they do not bring their own dialectical stance into question. They possess the special historical privilege which attached to English romantic poems written before the Reign of Terror, the Directory, and Napoleon's accession to power, as well as the political events in England which took place in response to continental circumstances." *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 108–09. For a fuller assessment of this book, see my review in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 18 (1984–85): 152–55.

<sup>20</sup>See *The Romantic Ideology* 131, 133–34.

<sup>21</sup>*Romantic Ideology* 37.

<sup>22</sup>Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1985) 340.

<sup>23</sup>*Beauty of Inflections* 342.

<sup>24</sup>Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 47.

<sup>25</sup>*The Beauty of Inflections* 119.

<sup>26</sup>So does Abrams, in essays such as his overlooked "What's the Use of Theorizing about the Arts?" in *In Search of Literary Theory*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972) 2–54. For a more positive assessment of Abrams's contributions to contemporary literary theory, see my foreword to his forthcoming collection of essays, *Doing Things with Texts* (New York: Norton, 1989).

<sup>27</sup>McGann's sympathetic, insightful discussion of George Crabbe and Christina Rossetti (in *The Beauty of Inflections*) suggests to me his willingness to expand the canon as well as critically reread it.

<sup>28</sup>See John Crowe Ransom, "Poetry: A Note in Ontology" and "Criticism as Pure Speculation," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 886, 885, 875.

<sup>29</sup>I adapt here a comment from Robert Penn Warren very much in the spirit of Ransom's work: "a poem to be good, must earn itself. It is motion toward a point of rest . . . movement through action toward rest, through complication toward simplicity of effect." "Pure and Impure Poetry," in *Critical Theory Since Plato* 991.

<sup>30</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 158.

<sup>31</sup>I suspect McGann would agree. In a later chapter he notes that "even the poetry committed to revolution—the 'reading' of Frederic [sic] Jameson, the 'writing' of Ron Silliman—is executed within the limits set for it by American imperialism . . ." (247). Before discuss-

ing the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, he says, "Of course, much of this work is weak, some of it is trivial, and a great deal has only a formal or aesthetic significance, despite its political urgencies. My interest here, however, is not in such matters. Rather, what I want to indicate is the kind of intervention L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E work typically seeks to make [hence his reliance on these writers' statements of intent]—how it tries to enter the world in a political way, and what it means to carry out through that entrance" (201). McGann shys away from investigating whether these writers succeed in entering the world in a political way. After again noting that the program of these writers "has a strong, usually an explicit, social and political orientation," he once more decides "to leave that aside for the moment . . . in order to concentrate on its more local and even technical aspects" (207). Such reticence is disappointing in a writer so admirably concerned with social, and not just literary, change. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry may stand "in the sharpest relief, stylistically, to the poetry of accommodation" (199) and still make very little happen.

<sup>16</sup>I will not pursue this parallel with Abrams except to say that insofar as it holds true, everything McGann says against Abrams would apply to himself (see above 0-0). Using McGann's own words against him, it would follow that to generate a polemic for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry on its own ideological terms is to vitiate criticism and to court mere intellectual sentiment—not the sentiment that we can transcend history but the sentiment that by experimenting with syntax we can change history.

<sup>17</sup>See also 234, 241–43, where McGann elaborates on how Blake's Christianity, an "ideological deformation" comparable to his "sexist theory of the emanations," "introduced into his work a network of other, equally pernicious falsehoods." Frye is presumably the critic most captivated by this Christian, "mystified" strain in Blake's work.

<sup>18</sup>W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier Books, 1961) 318.

<sup>19</sup>Yeats 158–59.

<sup>20</sup>I echo here David Simpson's plea, "let us above all refuse the consolation of a 'return' to history, and ponder instead all the reasons why we have not yet been there." "Literary Criticism and the Return to 'History,'" *Critical Inquiry*, 14 (1988): 747. I am not accusing McGann of complacently settling for a return to history. I am, however, asking him to ponder another one of Simpson's points: the "new enthusiasm for a rhetoric of referentiality and relevance would be hard to attribute to any grand shift in the social or political culture at large" (721). Like Simpson, I fear "that the status of historical inquiry has been so eroded that its reactive renaissance, in whatever form, threatens to remain merely gestural and generic" (725).

Rodney M. Baine, with the Assistance of Mary R. Baine. *The Scattered Portions: William Blake's Biological Symbolism*. Athens, GA: Distributed by the author, 1986. xx + 260 pp. Illus. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Terence Allan Hoagwood

*The Scattered Portions* is a scholarly guide to the symbolic meanings of plant and animal imagery in Blake's poetry and designs, including many species of beast, bird, insect, reptile, fish, tree, and plant. Sources for the meanings of these images include Boehme, Swedenborg, the Bible, iconographical works (e.g., Caesare Ripa), emblem books (e.g., Francis Quarles, John Huddleston Wynne, and John Bunyan), and Blake's poetic predecessors, including Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. A ground thesis of *The Scattered Portions* is that Blake's poems and designs often portray a fallen humanity "perceiving projections of his own psyche in various biological forms" (8), while many of these objectified aspects of humanity are "capable of being reclaimed" in a Blakean vision of regeneration. This book learnedly decodes specific animal and plant images to disclose what human property each represents. *The Scattered Portions* thus shares concerns with previous studies of emblematic and iconographical language by Beryl Rowland, Mary Lynn Johnson, and Judith Wardle (all of whom Baine cites), as well as Janet A. Warner's *Blake and the Language of Art* (1984), also a valuable book on such matters. Baine's biological focus provides a distinctive and informative frame of reference.

As always, the limits of a critical work involve matters of theory and method, spoken or unspoken, and I shall have more to say about such matters shortly. Baine's notion of "symbol" apparently operates more like S. Foster Damon's confident assumptions (in *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* [1924] and *A Blake Dictionary* [1965]) than, for example, Hazard Adams's argument (in *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* [1983]), let alone the semiotic and post-semiotic complexity of Nelson Hilton's *Literal Imagination* (1983) or the essays gathered by Thomas Vogler and Hilton in *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* (1985) or by Donald Ault, Mark Bracher, and Dan Miller in *Blake and the Argument of Method* (1988). The assumption that a symbol has meaning—that an image in word or design refers with some reliability to a conceptual object—is qual-