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R E V I E W

William Blake and the Regeneration of London, A
Conference

Helen P. Bruder

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REVIEWS

Conference: William Blake
and the Regeneration of
London, 19 October 1991

Reviewed by
Helen P. Bruder

A conference devoted to the exploration of "William Blake and the Regeneration of London" sounded like an excellent idea. No one acquainted with his work could doubt Blake's passionate commitment to the spiritual and temporal revival of the city in which he spent so much of his life. Nor can we today afford to disregard his vision of human potential bound within a decaying yet potentially vibrant metropolis. The problem with the recent day conference which addressed these issues, a problem perhaps endemic to such events, was that the subject rather overwhelmed the frame within which it was being discussed. There were just too many Blakes around at the Tate, wandering through an equally diverse warren of London streets. Perhaps the most lamentable disjunction caused by this profusion was that which emerged between the historically specific Blake and the politically relevant contemporary Blake, a disjunction sadly fostered by the scheduling of the day's events. However, the morning session "Blake and the Radical Spirit" did at times manage to bridge the gap, and for this reason was the most illuminating part of the conference.

The day began with an animated film by Sheila Graber, "William Blake" and a scene from Jack Shepherd's play, "In Lambeth," two brief presentations which vividly demonstrated the potential of Blake's art to speak to contemporary audiences through media other than those employed by Blake

himself. These were followed by a wonderful lecture from Joel Kovel, whose collection of essays on psychoanalysis and society provided the title for the morning session. Kovel approached the issue of Blake and regeneration through an account of his personal experience of reading and viewing Blake over a number of years; in particular he focused upon the irreducible and perhaps inexplicable "shudder" generated by the intensity of Blake's works. Kovel skillfully explicated Blake's vision of how the human self is formed in society and his belief that the self can only be regenerated in the context of a dynamic community, however painful this experience may be. He also offered the most engaging psychoanalytic account of Blake that this reviewer has ever encountered, one which succeeded because it tempered Freud's essentialist predilections with a Marxist radical perspectivism, and more importantly with a celebration of Blake's combative optimism. As Kovel seemed to suggest, the most regenerative aspect of Blake is his refusal to be seduced or defeated by pessimism. His poetry speaks of a redeemable "Los," not an irredeemable lack, a fact rarely pondered by those post-structuralists who wish to colonize the poet.

The morning was closed by a series of brief (rather too brief) papers from Anne Janowitz, Martin Postle and David Worrall, which brought the historical and urban Blake into sharp perspective. Postle offered some thought-provoking suggestions of possible sources for Blake's great image of regenerated masculinity commonly known as "Glad Day," while Janowitz and Worrall presented two impeccable historicist accounts of *Jerusalem*. These two papers, along with the work of Marilyn Butler and Susan Matthews, indicate one important direction in which the criticism of Blake's last epic poem might be heading, a path which shows the political bounty of a criticism premised upon a sensitive understanding of the structuring force of history.

The conference's two afternoon sessions comprised a variety of contributions which were largely guided by the concerns of the action-research network "London 2000," an organization launched in March 1990 and directed by one of the conference organizers, Bob Catterall. These contributors gave a very clear picture of the problems of community self-determination in many areas of London today, especially Kings Cross and Spitalfields. Yet as this vision of contemporary urban crisis took stark form, a sense of the relevance of Blake's concern with the regeneration of the city sadly ebbed away. The film "Chartered Streets," directed by Jeremy Wooding, was a partial exception.

The ambitious project "William Blake and the Regeneration of London" was, then, marked by a somewhat problematic diversity, a diversity well illustrated by the nature of the questions and contributions from the floor. These ranged from tentative enquiries about dates and names, to impassioned contributions about the crisis of identity in the alienating post-modern city or, again, to musings about the future of historical materialism in the light of recent events in Eastern Europe.

Yet maybe this profusion was the point. Perhaps ultimately the conference was marked by that refreshing excess which leads to the palace of wisdom. As Blake said "Enough! or too much." South African Jazz musician Bheki Mseleku's improvisation on *Jerusalem*, which closed the event, certainly epitomized the plentitude of a conference at which participants were spoiled by too much choice, rather than an event spoiled by it.