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D I S C U S S I O N

Reply to De Luca's review of Constructive Vision  
and Visionary Deconstruction

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lude, Shelley's *Defence*, Keats's letters, even the later poetry of Wallace Stevens, as well as some account of hermetic and neoplatonic antecedents. Needless to say, Otto provides none of this, and hence we have no way of knowing whether he has any clear understanding of the concept or of the differences to be found among its classic formulations—although we can sense that he has spared himself the need of explaining away any differences between, say, Keats's "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" and say, Urizen's intention to create a world ruled by "One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law." This is not the occasion to elaborate the differences between the expansive, open-ended, transformative, and fluid characteristics of the "autonomous" romantic imagination, and the reductive, closed, fixed, and solidifying characteristics of the world made by Lockean and Newtonian perceivers; one need only point out that Otto should show some awareness of these differences, and if he genuinely believes that these differences are illusory, that the similarities are more profound and basic, he should attempt to convince his reader with well-grounded, patient, step-by-step arguments.

The easier course, however, is to attempt something tried and true, namely a Blakean critique of Lockean conceptions—and this Otto accomplishes reasonably successfully—while seeming radical and new, by an arbitrary relabeling of Lockean empiricism as romantic idealism. In so doing, Otto aligns himself with those currently flourishing Schools of Resentment that are engaged in undermining further the fading prestige of romanticism in general and Frye in particular. But this gesture toward fashion—like the hasty apology at the end of the Introduction for not discussing sexism in his book (32)—is somewhat half-hearted, and no radical polemic damaging to

romanticism really emerges in this study. The same tentative quality is apparent in Otto's dealings with that even more fashionable movement of our critical era, deconstruction. On the one hand, Otto seems to want to advertise the book's connection with deconstruction, most conspicuously by lodging the term in the title itself and by using it generously throughout his commentary. On the other hand, Otto performs nothing remotely like a rigorous deconstructionist analysis in his treatment of themes and text. Indeed, some of the most valuable and thoughtful remarks in the whole book are devoted to showing the limitations of Derrida's analysis when applied to Blake (see 24-27). One emerges with the impression that the deconstructionist references are more for show than for practical use.

These equivocations, like the extravagant assertions, the need to display intimate acquaintance with the philosophers, the hand-is-quicker-than-the-eye modes of argument, all bespeak a certain insecurity on Otto's part about his project, a lack perhaps of a confident mastery of the subject that can spread conviction to his readers. This is a pity, for there is the germ here of a truly interesting and useful book on the limitations of radically monistic or solipsistic conceptions of Blake (which conceivably Otto could undertake some time in the future). As it stands, *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction* succeeds only in resembling too many other interpretive books on major poets, books that appear in print before they have found an adequate form to embody their intentions, that show less of an interest in the texture of the poetry than in abstract ideas, that are more comfortable with the milieu of such ideas than with genuine analytic rigor, that flirt with Derridean nihilism, and show uneasiness with a romantic humanism that they have in no way escaped. That there is evidence here of an unseized potential for something far finer is the chief regret one has in reading this book.

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## DISCUSSION

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*with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought*

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### Reply to De Luca's review of *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction*

by Peter Otto

After allowing that *Constructive Vision* "has at its core an interesting and valuable idea about Blake," De Luca's critique gets underway with the assertion that the book's "argument tends to proceed more by ungrounded assertions, associative leaps, and rhetorical sleights of hand than by rigorous philosophical analysis." I suppose that as the author of the book I should just accept De Luca's vigorous and rhetorical strictures and leave it at that. However, in this instance the right of reply has proved too tempting, though I will try to confine myself to a few brief remarks.

De Luca's first example of "ungrounded assertions, associative leaps, and rhetorical sleights of hand" is a parallel between Newtonian time and the "ORDERD RACE" (26, E 171) of *Jerusalem* that is drawn in the first paragraph of the third chapter of *Constructive Vision*. I am happy to believe that almost all of the issues that would arise from this conjunction are left unexplained or undeveloped in *this paragraph*—it is after all an introductory paragraph—but De Luca wants to argue that the reading of *Jerusalem* contained by the last four chapters of *Constructive Vision* somehow depends upon connections established here. According to De Luca, in this small paragraph a parallel between *Jerusalem* and fallen time is established on which an entire "superstructure of commentary proceeds to be built." In fact, this opening and introductory paragraph is in no sense the *ground* of the reading that follows.

The claims and certainties of the first paragraph represent a naive or first approximation that is complicated, and qualified, by the very next paragraph, and then by the rest of the chapter. The following chapters treat Newtonian time as at best one aspect (a superficial one at that) of fallen time. Newtonian time is not the subject of detailed analysis because this particular correlation is not of great importance for the argument that follows. *Constructive Vision* does argue that *Jerusalem* mirrors "some of our most fundamental experiences of time," but this claim is first made seven pages after the paragraph referred to by De Luca. Moreover, the claim is substantiated by an analysis of critical accounts of the experience of reading *Jerusalem*, a discussion of Locke's account of time in *An Essay*, and then by the extended reading of *Jerusalem* which follows.

De Luca's second example of "ungrounded assertions" is meant to be more substantial and more devastating. De Luca introduces it as an instance of a "slippery and elliptical kind of reasoning" that is "especially disturbing when it is employed to establish the major premises of the book's argument or to challenge the consensus critical position on Blake." I must admit that my language in the passage quoted by De Luca is a bit woolly and probably too earnest and enthusiastic. However, in his attempt to discredit my argument before it gets started, De Luca seems unnecessarily obtuse. Why should the phrase "somewhat like a guinea" refer only to size? What is so extraordinary about the assumption

that "an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty" is able to "talk, move and sing?" Why is the "therefore" in the penultimate sentence of the passage quoted by De Luca surreptitious and unearned? Isn't it reasonably self-evident that in this context talking, moving and singing had been understood to imply an alterity which cannot be reduced to our perception of it? Surely the phrase "interpenetrated with others" is, in this context, not as equivocal as De Luca suggests. Why doesn't he consider the possibility that "others" refers to the angelic hosts? There is after all a footnote to page 11 that, in an attempt to reduce the possibility of the kind of confusion alluded to by De Luca, explains the sense in which the word "other" is used in my argument. Or finally, why should De Luca be so resistant to the thought that "The world formed by Frye's imagination might discover within its bounds a force and presence which far exceeds its domain"? If domain can mean: (a) "estate, lands, dominions;" (b) "district under rule, realm, sphere of influence;" and "scope, field, province of thought or action," then surely for most people it is not an unusual experience to come across (within the bounds of their world) a force and presence which exceeds their domain. There is an inside/outside paradox here, but I really don't see why De Luca should find it so difficult to fathom.

One of the self-revealing moments in De Luca's review occurs when he claims that I "deliberately and persist-

ently" conflate "the world-forming imagination of the idealist tradition with the Urizenic making of enclosed, exclusionary worlds." De Luca believes that in so doing I align myself "with those currently flourishing Schools of Resentment that are engaged in undermining further the fading prestige of romanticism in general and Frye in particular." There is no doubt that De Luca is here raising a number of important issues but, rather than debating them, he frames them as charges to be answered in court. If I am to be charged with these views and these alliances (and I don't think that the issues are as cut and dried as he suggests), why not at least gesture towards the readings which after all make up more than 90% of the text? As my introduction carefully explains, when I wrote this book it was my opinion that "The nature of Los and the relationship between time and Eternity in Blake's oeuvre" (which together constitute, after all, the main subject matter of the book, not the reputation of Northrop Frye or the nature of the imagination in romanticism) could be elaborated most profitably "only within a discussion of the body of Blake's poetry." It is these readings that provide the ground and evidence for the wider generalizations that are made from time to time in *Constructive Vision*. It seems a shame that rather than arguing his case from the views put forward in *Constructive Vision* and clearly identifying his own "interest" in the issues at stake, De Luca chose a much easier course.