

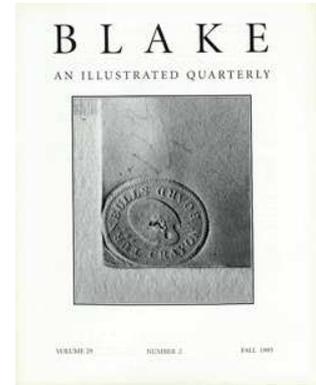
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R E V I E W

Harvey Birenbaum, *Between Blake and Nietzsche:
The Reality of Culture*

Stephen Clark

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R E V I E W

Harvey Birenbaum. *Between Blake and Nietzsche: The Reality of Culture*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992. Pp. xvi + 159; \$26.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN CLARK

Harvey Birenbaum's study of Blake and Nietzsche has both the strengths and weaknesses of its comparative format. It combines a broad characterization of intellectual affiliation with illuminating tessellations of detail, and has the considerable merit of attempting to situate Blake within the context of European romanticism. This is achieved, however, at the expense of an habitual recourse to composite generalization. The focus ceases to be making sense of the work of the individual author: problems of internal coherence and evolution are downgraded, if not altogether bypassed, to allow points of similarity and contact to be emphasized. But as the two thinkers have been yoked together since Yeats and Symons, it is welcome to have an extended treatment of their relation.

Birenbaum, however, has bigger fish to fry. After the reflex linguistic pyrrhonism of the past decades, the time may well be ripe for a contemporary reformulation of the neo-Kantian doctrine of symbolic forms associated with Cassirer and Langer, whose closest analogue in the field of Blake studies remains Northrup Frye. Birenbaum's ambition to rehabilitate this body of work deserves respect, and later in this review I wish to take up some of its premises in detail. First, however, some more general indication of the ground covered by Birenbaum may be helpful.

Both Blake and Nietzsche are characterized in terms of their "critique of all culture" (4), and on numerous occasions we are assured of their "almost identical pairs of psychological targets" (15). This lack of differentiation is indicative of a larger tendency to abstract from any specifiable cultural context. One might have expected, for example, some discussion of common intellectual genealogies, such as the critique of causality via Hume, the degree of adjustment before and after Darwin, and the extent of the continued dependence on a sentimentalist idea of innate impulse in both writers. When Bakhtin is invoked in the third chapter, there is no consideration of issues of power in the carnivalesque, of whether licensed transgression subverts or reconfirms hierarchies, and no attempt to identify the immanent speech-communities out of which the dialogic text is constructed. Such historical perspective as we encounter comes in terms of "European civilization precariously bal-

anced between predicament and opportunity" (40), or "cultural history" as a movement towards comprehension of the archetype (xvi).

Second, both writers are presented in terms of an "energetic explosion of the irrational" (4). This claim is partially rescinded in the case of Nietzsche, who, it is immediately acknowledged, "challenges customary reasoning out of logical necessity" (4) but continues to result in a highly reductive characterization of Blake's work. The presence of rationalist elements in his thoughts remains much more complex than this suggests: in terms of continuous intellectual preoccupation, Blake may even be said to have been of Urizen's party without knowing it. Such obvious examples come to mind as the heroic dimension of Urizen's struggle to create a world out of chaos, and the "sweet Science" that "reigns" after the "Spectre of Prophecy" has "Departed" (*FZ* 139.5-10 [IX 850-55], E 407), and the allocation of a ring-side seat at the resurrection to "Bacon & Newton & Locke (*J* 98:9). Furthermore, it is patently inadequate to assume that his work may somehow be exempted from "conventional rational interpretation" (7). As Blake himself reminds us, it is "a most pernicious Falshood" of Plato's that "Poets & Prophets do not know or Understand what they write or Utter" for "If they do not pray is an inferior Kind to be calld Knowing" (*VLJ* E 554).

Birenbaum moves without apparent qualm from Blake as a proponent of the irrational to a somewhat hackneyed version of the neglected visionary who was "virtually on his own" (53). From here it is a short step to insisting that he is a "shaman or a tribal artist" who must "be taken at his word" in his testimony of a spirit world (49-50). No original evidence is used to support this claim, and it is simple enough to refute. If we regard Blake in terms of his career as an engraver, a "professional among professionals," as Birenbaum himself puts it (50), he remains in continuous and productive interchange with a contemporary audience throughout his career. To discuss his work in terms of liminal states introduces an unnecessary element of melodrama and distracts attention away from the more interesting issue of the parodic, or at least dramatically contextualized use of the histrionic, in the prophesies.

The status of the psychological *per se* remains obscure. Both Blake and Nietzsche, we are told, possess an "absolute sense of themselves as persons" (4), but the obvious query as to how can we "read a text for the person in it" (6) when we construct that self from our encounter with that text is never adequately addressed. Such invocations would carry considerably more weight if some detailed consideration was given to the notion of personal identity implied by the "fortuitous concourse of memories accumulated & lost" (*J* 29:8). Instead we are offered a broadly therapeutic and wholly anachronistic ideal of self-expression.

"Culture," it is declared, "is a problem of personal psychology" (15). At the very least, several interim stages of ar-

gument need to be inserted in order to justify such a transposition. Bakhtin is invoked to perform this unification of private and public spheres, but as the title of the third chapter, "The solitary carnival," suggests, the effect is to internalize the cultural rather than socialize the psychic.

To "reinvent discourse" (6), Birenbaum argues, would transform both the self and the symbolic forms which it inhabits. This implies the recovery of an occluded mythopoeic dimension that simultaneously transcends and refutes "the leveling, abstracting, and objectifying force of conventional language" (6). Leaving aside the contentious nature of this characterization (does it include metaphor, for example?), it will be helpful to begin by considering its relevance to Nietzsche.

The more obviously mythic elements of the German philosopher's thought—the superman, eternal recurrence, the Apollonian and the Dionysiac—are precisely what the contemporary reader tends to find least satisfactory: Birenbaum himself finds them "sometimes forced and excessively conscious" (87). The problem is not that we have too few myths, but that we have too many, each claiming a self-authenticating priority. "As myths, they simply do not make logical contact" (82); consequently, there can be no rational grounds for preferring positions with which we might sympathize, say, the assault on slave morality to the arrogant elitism of a "myth of the nobler nobleman" (85). Birenbaum is left in the uncomfortable position of refusing to commit himself to the biologicistic affirmation of the Will to Power, with all its respective historical contamination, while still resisting a reading in terms of semiotic demystification in favor of a putative mythic plentitude.

The problem lies primarily in Birenbaum's insistence on the successive rather than contemporaneous nature of the conflict of interpretations. Blake and Nietzsche must not "simply undo the language and the culture given to them," but must instead "bring both closer to the logic of directly perceived relationships and the nature of immediate experience alive with feeling" (6-7). One does not have to be a card-carrying deconstructor to accept that the mediation of language itself precludes access to any such realm. Here, and throughout the book, the moment of affirmation is defined so nebulously as to be virtually meaningless. Birenbaum's analysis, by situating itself on the plane of the ontological, proves incapable of envisaging a hermeneutic level on which doubt may be seen as not merely the prelude to but synonymous with energetic creation.

The manifest shortcomings of his argument at this point do, however, have the virtue of drawing attention to a key issue: how may we conceptualize interpretation as a moment of denial and resistance without reverting to a philosophical concept of negativity or a glib and impoverished proclamation of the ludic?

With Blake, comparable problems arise. Although the early polemics on behalf of energy and delight tend to be more

favorably received than Nietzsche's adoration of power, the same interchange of dogmatism and self-reformulation is apparent. When Los proclaims, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Mans" (*J* 10:20), should the emphasis fall on the "System" or on the desire to "Create"? Birenbaum is by no means exceptional in claiming for Blake's writing the freedom of open-ended process while basing his exposition on locally doctrinaire pronouncements. There is virtually no attention to the narrative and dramatic structures of the later prophesies, nor consideration of their textual complexities. "Specialists" are somewhat disparagingly opposed to "new readers" (41), but Birenbaum's readings of the lyrics are deeply flawed by their apparent unconcern with the basic debates concerning viewpoint and persona: the narrator of "London," for example, is confidently classified as the "same voice of Blake"; the speaker of "The Fly" as affirming his "essential innocence" (63). One may feel broadly sympathetic to the aim of reading the *Songs* "without the defense of irony" (73) without preemptively dismissing all attempts to understand them "ironically or sociologically" as merely a "cyclical trap" (70); at the very least, some consideration of the generic inversion of hymn and children's song is required, and also their relation to Swedenborg's theory of correspondences. Furthermore there is little or no analysis of the specifically epistemological claims made by Blake. It may be more persuasive to regard the realm of imagination as founded upon a theory of constitutive metaphor than upon a quasi-Berkeleyan idealism, but the vocabulary in which it is articulated suggests the latter.

It would be clearer and more honest if Birenbaum were prepared to distinguish between levels of reality and to declare an investment in an ulterior, opaque dimension. Instead, he claims to be offering a secular account of cultural symbolism when his arguments at their most plausible pull in precisely the opposite direction. The move to the ontological without adequate prior consideration of the semantic all too easily becomes a mode of dogmatism: all that restrains Birenbaum is a humanist vocabulary of culture which is clearly at variance with the assertions designed to support it.

Two questions cannot be avoided if one is to resuscitate a vocabulary of symbolic forms: what is the relation of the mythic to the related but distinct phenomena of metaphor and symbol? and secondly, how are we to arbitrate between competing or contradictory manifestations? Birenbaum's terminology shifts confusingly on the first issue: sometimes the symbol appears to be verbal; at others it is opposed to the merely figural. It "provides a focus to comprehend the unity of author, audience, thought, and the world—in the work of imagination, where they all meet naturally" (xii), a process supported by analogy with the "process of projection" (xiv), an oddly Lockean conjunction of screen and darkened room. Even if one accepts that there is an initial state of "fragmentation" to be overcome, it remains to be

seen whether "integration" is likely to be forthcoming in the texts of Blake and Nietzsche.

The symbol "holds various impulses in tension, and involves itself in conflict with other points of view" (xiv), a capacity designated "quasiousness" (xii). Although myth has previously been defined "as an instrument to know what is valid" (xi), it now transpires that it is "powerfully meaningful because it is also going to be wrong" (xiii). The term "collusion," in the sense of playing with, is used to define this relation (xiii): "we grant them their own charm and eagerly fall under their spell." Thus the authority of the symbol derives from an active forgetting of its origin, exactly the process which the myth of Albion and Vala dramatizes and one would have thought exposed.

Birenbaum is clearly vulnerable to the familiar charge laid against the phenomenology of religion: that its descriptive (and arguably implicitly prescriptive) method is devoid of the element of conflict contained within a properly hermeneutic stance. It can serve as no more than a confirmatory mode, willing to divulge its enigmas only to those who have already decided what they can find. There is no element of risk or uncertainty in "this way of knowing that requires appreciation, if not awe" (xvi).

Birenbaum's specific arguments against deconstructive approaches are unimpressive: it seems peculiar to treat Derrida's "Spurs" rather than "White Mythology" on the issue of philosophical metaphor (108-11); and to dismiss de Man's reading of Nietzsche for treating signs as "binary substitutions" rather than "unifying participations" ignores his assiduous demonstrations of the dependence of the one on the other (107-08). Above all, Birenbaum underestimates the sheer productivity of a semiotic model, even though his own infrequent close analyses of Blake's language are clearly indebted to it (e.g., 54-59). But in terms of its basic hermeneutic stance, it may be seen as continuous with rather than antithetical to the ubiquitous skepticism of recent methodologies. Their frequently exemplary rigor and finesse have been customarily expanded on behalf of Blake, whose decentered universe and habitual indeterminacy of text provide convenient corroboration of their supposedly subversive analyses.

Birenbaum provides a helpful introductory commentary on the relation of Blake and Nietzsche, but if we take his larger ambitions seriously, his book may be seen as mirroring what it claims to displace. It cannot disbelieve enough, but attains a representative significance in this failure. The contrast with *Fearful Symmetry* may be illuminating. Whereas Birenbaum makes no attempt to circumscribe the domain of myth, Frye insists upon both an internal dynamism within its concentric levels and perhaps, more importantly, a judicious sense of what it could not incorporate. The euphoria of Frye's exposition is at all times tempered by a residual astringency, and it is perhaps this quality from which Blake studies in the 1990s can learn most.