

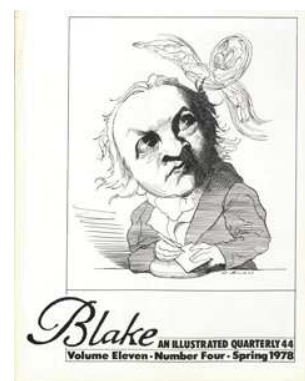
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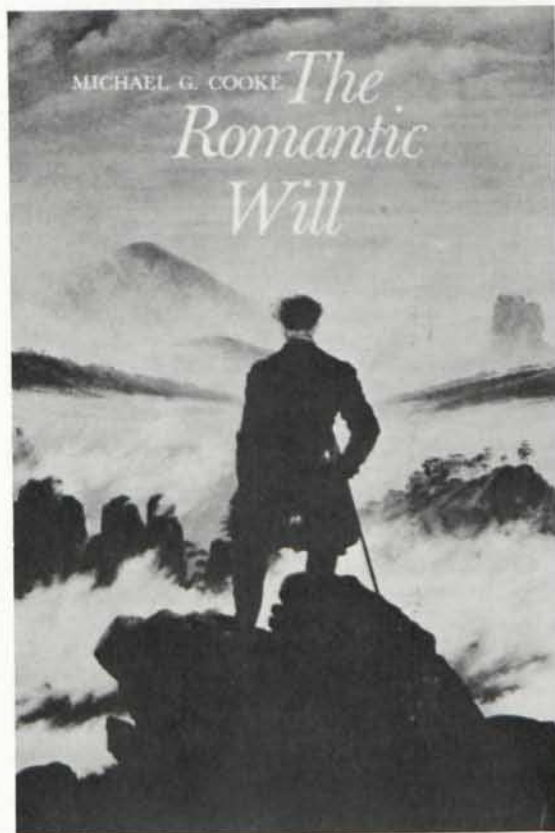
Michael G. Cooke, *The Romantic Will*

Laurence Goldstein

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Michael G. Cooke. **The Romantic Will.**
 New Haven & London: Yale University Press,
 1976. Pp. xviii + 279. \$15.00.
Reviewed by Laurence Goldstein



The valuation of will by English writers before the Romantic period is not a favorable one. Ulysses' speech on order in *Troilus and Cressida* associates it with "appetite," devouring and self-devouring, a connection later elaborated by Hobbes and dramatized by Milton in the figure of Satan. Heroic drama, too, seems in essence a disembodied conflict of imperial wills, each devoted to conquest until annihilated either by force of arms or the power of love. Blake is never more "English Blake" than in his epic depiction of the fall of the Zoas into willful selfishness and their rivalry with the Female Will engendered from their worldly appetites. Blake's giant forms enact the pattern of self-division and aggression he found in his immediate tradition. And of course he spoke from the historical center of a whirlwind of will generated by political ambition, as Ulysses did. Faced with Robespierre, Pitt, and then Napoleon, no Romantic artist could endorse the privileges of an individualistic craving for power, though some, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, came to tolerate certain repressive measures by the State after the Congress of Vienna.

While the English tradition, including Blake, sought boundaries for the appetitive will, a series of German philosophers glorified it by transmuting its essential character. Schelling, Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer--these are the principal contributors to a nineteenth-century doctrine

that sought to preserve the individual from self-contempt by apotheosizing a will to power, usually collective power, sometimes the power of the State. Whatever these writers would have said about Hitler, he became their inevitable disciple. It is no accident that the most famous artwork of this century bearing the word is Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, with its Wagnerian motifs, its famous opening shots of the Leader descending from the clouds to address a multitude which he has welded into a single militant will. The reputation of Romantic philosophy, especially the German variety, suffered from the Nazi experience. (I remember vividly a lecture in my undergraduate philosophy course on Hegel's theory of the Will and the State. After some twenty minutes the professor stopped in mid-sentence and exclaimed, "I refuse to go on pretending this nonsense is philosophy!") The general antagonism overflowed into criticism of the English tradition as well, for texts of Blake, Byron, and Carlyle especially lent themselves to the kind of suspicion one finds in Eric Bentley's *A Century of Hero Worship*, not to mention the New Criticism and the wartime polemics that Jacques Barzun attempted to refute in *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*.

The critic who wishes to give a positive valuation to the Romantic Will must proceed with care. *Manfred* and *Heroes and Hero Worship* must go unmentioned this time around, and their

admirer Nietzsche as well. Michael G. Cooke does just this, and though his tactic of making-texts-invisible is certainly suspect, his study is illuminating and cohesive. Examination of a psychic faculty as it seems to operate in or inform a number of texts can be a thankless task. And the will especially, because it governs choice, decision, and action, can be discerned almost everywhere in lyric and narrative situations. Cooke has not let this difficulty defeat him but has constructed a canon that enables him to emphasize the sanity of Romantic striving, its proverbial Englishness.

Cooke proceeds as one might expect: he distinguishes between what this reviewer (not the author) might term the primary and secondary will. The primary will Cooke describes in various places as "empirical or locally purposive," "particular," and "merely personal." This is the will manifest in assertive states, when the self is in the act of defining specific objectives, or bringing about specific changes through conscious choice. The defiance of Jupiter by Prometheus is one example, or the intentions of Wordsworth when in *The Prelude* he steals a rowboat or climbs Mt. Snowdon to see the sunrise. When Keats in his early work insists that he *will* be a poet, he is exercising this primary activity of mind. This is the will that seeks for trophies--for knowledge, fame, and power. Though it can be a hazard if embraced as an exclusive good, it is a necessary precondition for the operation of the secondary will.

The secondary will Cooke describes as a "will of being," an "ontological" or "metaphysical" will. It most frequently appears when the other has subsided and the mind achieves not the petty trophy it sought but a new state of consciousness informed with what Wordsworth calls the "sentiment of being," the apprehension of powers greater than the self with which the self harmoniously participates. The product of this mutuality is joy, the joy that cannot, by the foregoing definition, be actively sought as an object--Coleridge explains this in the Dejection Ode--but must inform the mind already as a condition of being discovered. Cooke cites the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude* as a *locus classicus* of the passage from one state of will to another, Wordsworth being granted an apocalyptic vision in the act of checking off another item on his tourist itinerary.

Cooke's thesis is that the Romantic will permits this secondary act of mind by keeping fluid or open the relation between "self and system." The neoclassical position, Cooke writes, "is that the self is best in the system, the system is best for the self." He illustrates this rather uncontroversial point by extensive and wholly superfluous analyses of works by Corneille, Addison, Boileau, Pope, and Molière. I might add that the choice and treatment of texts throughout is something of a puzzle. Cooke's discussion of the Romantic will seems to be headed toward a significant new perspective on *Prometheus Unbound*, and yet that work receives less attention than does *Tartuffe*. Commentary on the Dejection Ode is

truncated, but we get a lengthy rehash of Geoffrey Hartman's reading of "The Solitary Reaper." This last passage constitutes yet another one of those *hommages à Hartman* that seem to have become obligatory in writings on Romanticism emerging from Yale. Cooke has produced a good book, but there is a lingering sense of the devoted pupil in these pages, expressed by his choice of some literary and critical texts, his avoidance of others, and his emphatic use of the terminology of "consciousness."

His study of Blake, however, is provocative and if not wholly original at least seems consonant with his general conclusions rather than an external "system." Cooke focuses on *Jerusalem* because of his interest in the way "Blake immediately, bluntly, and uncompromisingly gears this poem to the satisfaction of the will of Los." Los's will is a form of terror; he seeks to coerce the results he desires by means that may not always have the reader's approval. Cooke sees this as Blake's Prometheanism, a mode most familiar to us from the discomfiting Proverbs of Hell and the dramatic situations in his early prophetic works that still have the power to unsettle us. I have always been disturbed, for example, by Oothoon's offer to Theotormon in the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*:

But silken nets and traps of adamant will
Oothoon spread,
And catch for thee girls of mild silver or
of furious gold

We admire Oothoon for conquering her shame and jealousy, but wonder whether compelling other girls to find pleasure in copulation with her mate isn't a little Bromion-like. Her action corresponds to Los's treatment of the Spectre without the saving consideration that the Spectre is, after all, not another person but a negative temptation of Los's own nature.

It is not so much Los's exercise of the primary will that interests Cooke as the fact that Los's will is a will to art, and the artist's salvific influence must wait upon the public's appreciation of his perfected vision. Unlike Orc, "the Los character . . . remains for his part curiously dependent and subject to the vicissitudes of place and person." Los can bring no resolution to the action, however bold his commandments to the Sons and Daughters of Albion. He can only suffer the injustices he observes and propose, usually in isolation, the truth his idolatrous and selfish community needs for its redemption. A reading of *Jerusalem* that sees the conclusion as an apocalypse created by Los's will to power, according to Cooke, confuses Blake with Los; it mistakes the successful fact of the text with the drama within. Rather, a reader must observe that Blake and Los become identified with Christ by a recognition of universal suffering. Again, the striving primary will is suspended and the dramatic effect, culminating in Albion's leap into the Furnaces of Affliction, is a radical change of being that makes genuine compassion possible.

Cooke could have made useful reference to Blake's letters to illustrate the connection between Los the character and Blake the creator. Blake seems obsessed with his mission as an artist and with the worldly comforters who tempted him to bury his talent. *Jerusalem* is among other things an autobiographical anatomy of his triumphant will to art, concluding honestly--a heroic moment in Blake's verse--with the artist breaking his wand as a condition of collective salvation. *Jerusalem*, the reader must realize, is an act of Memory to some degree, and like other "filthy garments" (*Milton* 41:6) soiled by Experience it must be burned with its creator in the last fiery furnace. When Blake ceased to struggle with willfulness he relapsed into just the kind of high-toned dogma he once put into the mouth of Urizen. We then get nostrums like the *Laocöon* with its thundering commandments: "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." Fortunately Blake did not write a new epic in his last years or we might have gotten something akin to the priestly books of *The Excursion*.

Art is Blake's tabernacle and fortress both. His enemy is the poet's onetime object of worship, The Female Will, the figure of sexual generation, for whose favor even the sensible English tradition put itself in chains.

Read in my face, a volume of despairs,
The wailing Iliads of my tragic woe;
Drawn with my blood, and printed with
my cares,
Wrought by her hand, that I have
honored so.
Who whilst I burn, she sings at my
soul's wrack,
Looking aloft from the turret of
her pride:
There my soul's tyrant joys her, in
the sack
Of her own seat, whereof I made her
guide.
There do these smokes that from
affliction rise
Serve as an incense to a cruel Dame:
A sacrifice thrice grateful to her eyes,
Because their power serves to exact the
same.
Thus ruins she, to satisfy her will,
The Temple, where her name was
honored still.

Thus Samuel Daniel. Worship of the Female Will is the type of idolatry, and it is crucial to the artist's triumph in *Jerusalem*, a political as well as an autobiographical poem, that Los overcome the very will to power that Blake had applauded in liberated women like Oothoon in those balmy days when he thought Orc was a splendid fellow. Cooke simply refuses to engage this aspect of Blake's sensibility, to enter the dramatic conflict involving the omnipresent voices of the Female Will--Enitharmon, Gwendolen, Cambel, Vala, Tirzah, Rahab, Britannia--which proclaim that "The Man who respects Woman shall

be despised by Woman / And deadly cunning & mean abjectness only, shall enjoy them / For I will make their place of joy & love excrementious." Blake avenges himself upon the speaker by making her publicly confess these appalling facts of life. A reader of *Jerusalem* must see how English Blake reforms his tradition at this point, but to do so reference must be made to works like Daniel's poem, or *Samson Agonistes*, or the like; *Tartuffe* will be no help, nor *Cato*, nor *L'Art Poétique*. Cooke loses contact with Blake because he seems out of sympathy with Blake's tortured struggles against the genital conditions of the fallen world. Cooke tries to be superior to his subject, who seems (to him) an unconscionably long time in *Jerusalem* resolving the agon of the primary will. In addition, an effusive passage of Cooke's on the contribution of the Daughters of Albion to Los's labors suggests that the author has raised his consciousness high enough to overlook Blake's putative sexism. The Female principle is a hero of *The Romantic Will*, emerging in full glory during Cooke's extended, and well-argued, analyses of *The Fall of Hyperion* and the *Ode to Autumn*. But even this triumph would be more significant if part of Blake's text had not been made invisible, if Blake had not been read retrospectively through the medium of Keats's resolution.

Blake believed that art has the power to correct even sexual division. Samuel Daniel cremates himself, Blake sends Albion into the furnace so that the Sexes (and sex) must vanish and cease. From this willed death the public that undergoes it, by means of the poem *Jerusalem*, may arise into life. But in what form? Albion's first regenerate act is to reach for his Bow of desire: "And he clothed himself in Bow & Arrows, in awful state, Fourfold." He slays the Druid Spectre, or rational part, of Humanity. The passage deliberately echoes the description of the Spectre Sons of Albion in Plates 65-66, "immense in strength & power / In awful pomp and gold," who construct Stonehenge as a temple of the Enlightenment. In this latter-day Arthurian romance English Blake slays Voltaire and Rousseau. He sends flaming arrows into Bacon, Newton, and Locke. The militant tone of this passage, so reminiscent of Edward Young in its destructive fantasies masked as patriotism and piety (Albion and Christ), makes me a little uncomfortable, and my misgivings extend to analyses like Cooke's which identify the "final moment" (Cooke's phrase) of the poem as Albion's sacrifice. In my text the poem does not end at 96:35.

Cooke rightfully says that a Romantic poem tends to waver between Prometheism and Stoicism, and that its structure is more often an oscillation between the two poles than a direct movement from one state of being to another. This suggests the problem of interpretation we encounter in confronting Romantic texts, never sure which points can be assembled into an authentic pattern, always reading a concluding scene or a penultimate scene as a definitive statement. Artists like Blake planned it that way, of course, by keeping their "system" open enough to accommodate our own changing perspective. Whatsoever point we gain,

we yet have something to pursue. A critic's disregard of native tradition and historical context, then, and his recourse to the language of "consciousness," will result in a partial but not comprehensive reading of a text as complex as *Jerusalem*. In his armed vision, his appetite for a Christian Triumph as absolute as Edward Young's, Blake simply cannot be mistaken for Wordsworth or

Keats or Wallace Stevens or anyone else. The errors of generalization, as Blake eloquently maintained, outweigh the insights. If Blake were Cooke's Blake he would not speak so compellingly to a public still convinced, in depths so profound that only art can reach, that it will escape non-entity by finding new worlds to conquer.

Joan Evans. *A History of The Society of Antiquaries*. Oxford: Society of Antiquaries, 1956. Published rebound, London: Thames & Hudson, 1977. Pp. xv + 487. 44 black-and-white plates.
Reviewed by David Worrall



"Death and the Antiquaries", from Thomas Rowlandson's *English Dance of Death*, c. 1795

The British Antiquities are now in the Artist's hands" wrote Blake in *A Descriptive Catalogue*. This rebound issue of Joan Evans's book, distributed by Thames & Hudson, and dealing with the Society's history from its Renaissance precursors up to the early 1950's, provides a timely opportunity for examining the intellectual context of Blake's "visionary contemplations" concerning his own country.

Professor England has shown us how Samuel Foote's parody of an Antiquaries meeting in *The Nabob* led the way to Etruscan Column's lecture on "virtuous cats" in "An Island in the Moon." Reading through the eighteenth-century part of this history one can see how nearly Foote held the mirror up to life. This production of the summer of 1772 must have virtually coincided with the beginning of Blake's apprenticeship to James Basire, who had been the Society's engraver since March 1759. Foote's joke about Antiquaries and cats had been sparked off by a paper read by Samuel Pegge in December 1771 in which he conjectured that Dick Whittington's "cat" had been the name of a type of ship. The ridicule prompted by *The Nabob* brought Horace Walpole's resignation from the Society in 1773 but he had earlier confided his intention in a letter to William Cole written on 28 July 1772, only a few days before Blake's exchange of indentures with Basire. Despite nineteen years of membership, Walpole's involvement with the Society had been

indifferent and recently embittered by criticism, so that this episode of "their council on Whittington and his cat, and the ridicule that Foote has thrown on them" (to Cole) provided a convenient but honorable occasion for departure.

The Basire family held their position well into the nineteenth century, and Joan Evans has made the forgivable error of attributing William as the apprentice of James Basire the Younger who was elected a Fellow in 1823. Fortunately for Blake's training, both master and apprentice had only the very highest standards to seek to emulate since, until his death, almost all previous engraving for the Society had been under the management and general surveillance of George Vertue. Vertue had not only been one of the Society's founder members, but both benevolent and indefatigably active on its behalf for nearly half a century, and it was largely through his influence that the early parts of *Vestuta Monumenta* contained as much medieval material as they did. It was for this irregularly issued record of the Society's activities and interests that Blake's Westminster Abbey sketches were intended, probably following the immediate initiative of Richard Gough, who had become their enthusiastic Director the year before Blake's entry into apprenticeship.

In his *Topographical Antiquities* (1768), Gough had bemoaned the lack of an antiquarian periodical