

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Barbara Bray and Bernard C. Swift, trans., Michel
Le Bris, *Romantics and Romanticism*

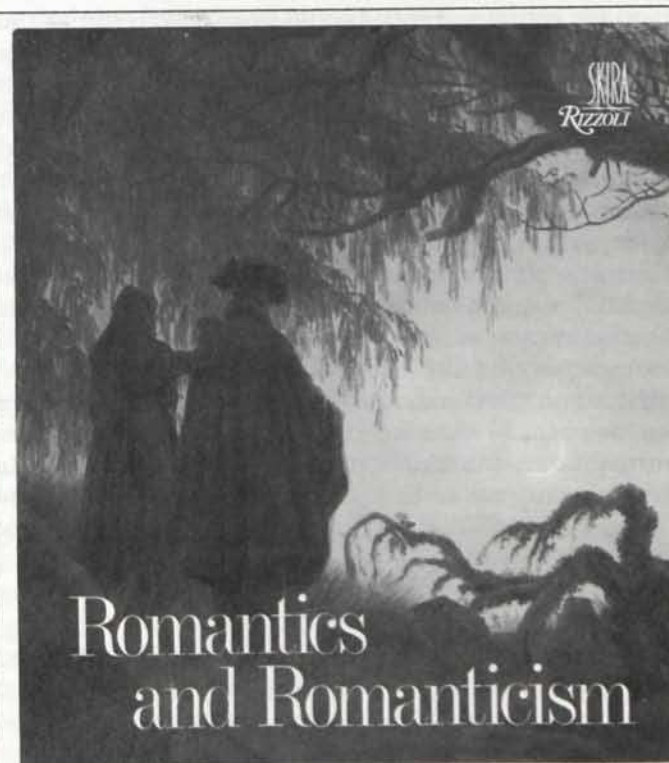
Dennis M. Read

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 17, Issue 3, Winter 1983-1984, pp.
114-116



mind," and thus forming an "ominous anticlimax" (pp. 115-16)! Since for me there is a qualitative difference between the satiric mocker and the satirized mocked, I cannot follow Scholz's logic when he states that Blake's "Memorable Fancies" as a whole do not differ "from Swedenborg's predestinarian theology" (p. 117). If this critique of Blake's concept of contraries in the *Marriage* is to be justified by reference to his later doctrine of the forgiveness of sins (which of course is an anti-doctrinal idea), Scholz would not only violate his "developmental approach," but at the very same time misinterpret both ideas: error has to be cast out, not less so in *Jerusalem* than in Blake's early works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. "Blake, for one," as Scholz himself states, "did not hesitate about where he wanted to belong" (p. 119). Similarly, Blake's prophetic books of the Lambeth period hardly provide the criteria to evaluate Novalis' *Glauben und Liebe*. Written under widely different political and social conditions, the respective "vision of romantic politics" had to be as different, and we ought to be careful not to reproach poets with the historical situation which to a certain extent determines their production.

It may well be that other readers of this book will find all the shortcomings I have tried to point out rather irrelevant when compared with the many interesting and erudite interpretations the book certainly contains. Yet, as Scholz himself puts it in a passage related to Novalis' fragments, the "quest towards truth demands an endless progression in which every step has to be exceeded and every gain has to remain a mere approximation" (p. 90). This review, then, is simply intended to supply the Blakean contrary which is necessary for such a progression. "Reflection must sooner or later begin to stagnate because it relates 'nur unter dem Gleichen' . . . ; poetry can progress because it relates what is unlike and unlikely. Only from such unlikely marriages, such incongruous crossbreeding, can we expect any new and promising offspring" (p. 92). Though (or because?) Novalis and Blake remain an unlikely marriage, this last quotation may well legitimate the procedure chosen by Joachim J. Scholz. He has written a provocative book, well worth the attention of any literary critic dealing with the international phenomenon of romanticism and its "high arguments."



Michel Le Bris. *Romantics and Romanticism*, trans. by Barbara Bray and Bernard C. Swift. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1981. 224 pp., 214 illus. \$85.00.

Reviewed by Dennis M. Read

This is a book divided against itself. On the one hand, it is a richly illustrated coffee table book, with nearly half its 214 reproductions in full color and all of them printed on heavy paper stock. It is a book that practically dictates a certain ambience: the coffee table, certainly, along with the warm glow of logs burning in a fireplace, a magnum of Perrier-Jouët chilling in an ice bucket, and a tray of caviar and toast. A man and a woman, each with champagne glass in hand, bend over the Rizzoli *Romantics and Romanticism*, slowly turning the pages and admiring the paintings. "Ah, yes," the woman says languorously to the man. "We saw that one in the Rouen Musée des Beaux-Arts in 1978." She turns her head to look deep into his eyes. "Do you remember?"

They have a lavish selection of reproductions to linger over. Included in the volume are works of artists from Germany (Carstens, Friedrich, Pforr, Runge, Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Schwind), France (Boulanger, Daumier, David, Delacroix, Fragonard, Géricault, Gros, Ingres, Millet), Spain (Goya), and England (Blake, Calvert, Constable, Flaxman, Fuseli, Linnell, Martin, Palmer, Turner, Wright of Derby). Practically every page

contains at least one reproduction, with the layout of the book divided rather evenly between pictures and text. From this standpoint the volume delivers a great deal: numerous and large reproductions of paintings, drawings, and engravings in rich color or vivid black and white and in sharp detail.

On the other hand, the text of the book seems to cry out against this luxurious production and the opulent society it was made for. The text is a manifesto calling upon readers to resist all forms of institutional oppression and to discover the absolute sovereignty of the individual through the transfiguring power of language. Such a manifesto seems better suited to a pamphlet, or to the newsprint pages of an ephemeral paperback, illustrated with blurred black-and-white photos of demonstrators marching against the state. In fact, the author of the text, Michel Le Bris, is accustomed to such a format for most of his previous publications. Three of them, *Occitanie: Volem viure! (Nous voulons vivre!)*, *Les fous du Larzac*, and *La revolte du Midi*, published in 1974 and succeeding years, are part of a series called *Le France Sauvage*, directed by Le Bris, along with Jean-Pierre Le Dantec and Jean-Paul Sartre. Each of these three volumes deals with specific contemporary incidents involving the French government's suppression of an indigenous population and the resistance of that population—a resistance that, Le Bris asserts, has its origins in the French Resistance of World War II.

The thumbnail biography of Le Bris on the book-jacket of *Romantics and Romanticism* describes him as a participant in the 1968 student riots, a founder of the *Magazine Littéraire*, a past editor of *Jazz Hot*, and co-collaborator (with Sartre) on the journals *La Cause du Peuple* and *J'Accuse*. He currently contributes regularly to the *Nouvel Observateur*. Early in *Romantics and Romanticism* Le Bris refers to his two most recent books, *The Man with the Wind at His Heels* (1977) and *The Lost Paradise* (1981), in which he discourses broadly on his version of romantic anarchy. Le Bris is more a fiery Orc than a faithkeeping Los.

Le Bris defines romanticism as "not so much a structured movement with an explicit programme as an insight, an impulse; . . . perhaps merely a dream of an as yet unknown form of thought which it is incumbent upon us of the twentieth century to discover" (p. 56). If Le Bris refuses to interpret the subject matter and treatment of various poems, novels, and paintings as forming a coherent and consistent pattern within a historical period, he nevertheless confines his discussion to British and European painters and writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, therefore establishing *de facto* a romantic period. Still, Le Bris is intent on identifying within this group a certain imaginative act which transcends time and place, history and geography, rather than describing certain philosophic, stylistic, and

ideological characteristics which a number of artists happened, more or less, to share. In order to make that imaginative act more evident, Le Bris intends first to establish "an area of liberty where the unprejudiced mind and eye may appreciate the amazing growth and profusion of art in the Romantic age and after" (p. 194).

Le Bris conceives of the romantic ideal as a mediating realm in which symbols and images supply new meanings and form a new reality. This realm is essential to any aspiration for freedom because it not only defines a perfect state of thought and action but also provides a fixed point from which all mundane experience can be measured. Transcendent knowledge is impossible otherwise. Human history, for instance, according to Le Bris, "has no meaning without a point of reference outside history from which to measure it; without a metahistory or dimension of eternity" (p. 68). The artist who produces such a "metahistory" is a prophet, "not because he foresees the future but because he discloses the unseen" (p. 175).

In the opinion of Le Bris, two artists best disclose the unseen. The first is Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), whom Le Bris calls the finest artist of German romanticism. Le Bris finds in Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1809–10) "nothing less than a break in the course of Western painting, the sudden rising of a new continent, a shift in the very meaning of art" (p. 77). In this and other paintings Friedrich discloses a sense of both isolation and communion through one or several figures standing in a stark or barren landscape (often a seashore) and staring away from the viewer at a crescent moon or cloud-filled sky. Friedrich's achievement is in fulfilling a dual truth of aesthetics and eschatology; in Le Bris's words, "beauty is always the manifestation of the infinite in the finite: *theophany*" (p. 85). More than a dozen of Friedrich's paintings of this kind are reproduced in *Romantics and Romanticism*, including a detail of *A Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* (1830–40) on the bookjacket. But Le Bris believes Friedrich "brought romanticism to fruition" when he "led the symbol back to the very simple test of the face, in the sudden concerted appearance of the Law and of love . . ." (p. 90).

The second artist is Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), who found that the painted line, according to Le Bris, "identifies, localizes, represents. . . . The outlines, together with what may be called the non-colours of the palette, white, grey, and black, therefore function in painting as the 'bearers of allegory,' the conveyors of those meanings which always refer the work back to a discourse outside the work itself" (p. 184). Delacroix, however, fell short of the achievement of Friedrich, for he disregarded "the transcendental dimension of the symbol and its character as an epiphany, as an ultimate, *intransitive* sign . . . [H]e failed to realize, because still too much a man of the world, that his salvation lay, not in contending with this dualism [of matter and extension], but in distinguishing between its elements and *symbolizing*

them in terms of a third mediating world where the meaning of *Presence* would emerge clearly" (p. 186). Delacroix, in other words, is a failed romantic, in spite of the possibilities his own art discloses.

At the other extreme of romanticism are the Don Juans, those figures whose insatiable hunger for a certain knowledge condemned them to wander the world their whole lives, strangers to every person and in every place. One such figure is Byron, who became in the public view "a rebellious satanic aristocrat, a fated hero who died for Greece" (p. 131). Another is Napoleon, who represented "both freedom and terror, both fate and willpower, under the sign of Satan" (p. 131). A third is Turner, whose paintings extol "the delights of catastrophe" (p. 113) and who was incapable of painting the human face, "the very place where the symbolic is revealed . . ." (p. 188). Turner's "pictures of nothing—and very like" (Hazlitt's phrase) are, in the view of Le Bris, "absolute anti-romanticism" (p. 188). Each of these figures isolated himself from the rest of humanity, assuming "an independent, individual State, owing allegiance to no one, acknowledging only the fact of his own future death . . ." (p. 130). In disavowing the existence of a World-Soul, they embraced an unyielding cynicism.

Le Bris finds a special place for Blake in his pantheon of romantics, devoting six pages to his "search for an inner Jerusalem" in a chapter titled "In the Beginning was the Word" and including six Blake reproductions: *Jerusalem* pls. 25 and 35, *Elohim Creating Adam*, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, the Dante *Circle of the Lustful*, and the Job "When the Morning Stars Sang Together." Blake, as opposed to the romantic Don Juans, did not reject society but rather was rejected by society. This fate makes Blake "probably a unique example of a man of genius who was almost unusable by English society, and therefore doomed to the most terrible loneliness" (p. 66).

This and other general statements about Blake are made in the right spirit, even if they are hyperbolic. More troubling within Le Bris's six-page discussion are the numerous factual errors: *Poetical Sketches* "remained unsold." (In fact, Blake never attempted to sell copies of the volume.) *The French Revolution* was printed and published in 1791. (It actually advanced no further than printer's proofs.) Leigh Hunt wrote the *Examiner* review of the 1809 Public Exhibition. (The true author was his brother, Robert Hunt.) At the time of Blake's death, Tatham was "a recent convert to a sect that regarded Blake as the devil incarnate." (On the contrary, Tatham wrote of Blake, "the serpent had no share in his nature.") Swinburne's critical study of Blake did more to establish Blake's modern reputation than any other work. (In fact, the public reception was so dismal that Swinburne called the volume "the most unlucky and despised of all my brain-children.") Bowlahoola is a mythical figure. (It is in

Blake's mythological structure the inward body of stomach, heart, and lungs.) This extensive list is eclipsed only by Le Bris's statement later in the volume that "In 1836, together with Thoreau and Walt Whitman, Emerson founded the Transcendental Club" (p. 172), a non-existent meeting establishing a non-existent society nearly twenty years before Emerson wrote his famous letter greeting Whitman at the beginning of a great career.

The problem, of course, is that Le Bris is not an authority on his subject, however passionately he writes about it. He therefore misstates information, perhaps without realizing it. He also maintains silent reliance on unidentified or only vaguely identified authorities. His chapter on "The East of the Imagination," for instance, is deeply indebted to Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance orientale*, a work Le Bris never mentions. The other chapters are similarly derivative of other unnamed sources.

For Le Bris, these criticisms would be simply the carplings of scholars, the "frosty custodians of defunct signs" (p. 93), or of linguists, who "are always failed writers" (p. 193). What matters to him is whether his discussion radicalizes his audience. On the last page of his text Le Bris quotes from a letter sent to him by Maurice Clavel, the leader of the French Resistance who liberated Chartres cathedral from the Nazis and presented it to De Gaulle and who was a leading figure in the 1968 student riots. The source of the statement is more important than the statement itself. Politics is all. Art history and literary history are important primarily in teaching political lessons. Art of the twentieth century, Le Bris claims, has "proceeded to exterminate the Subject, swamping it in the flux of Becoming, dissolving it into 'fields of intensity,' shattering it in the lyrical explosion of matter—exterminating and shattering to less spectacular effect no doubt than Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin, but they have been moving in the same direction" (p. 194). Clearly Le Bris is not addressing cognoscenti of the fine arts but rather "those readers who hold, with Thomas Jefferson, that 'a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing' . . ." (p. 9).

But are those readers the sort who spend eighty-five dollars on a coffee-table book? More likely Le Bris's readers are closer to the champagne-sipping couple. And their interests lie elsewhere than the text. "This is a quite beautiful book," the man says, closing its cover and turning to the woman. "Shall we order the *Impressionists and Impressionism* volume?"

