

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*

Michael Fischer

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 18, Issue 3, Winter 1984-85, pp. 152-155



marks by which to explore the *terra incognita* of the epics. Although Urizen is characterized deftly, everyone else gets short shrift. All that is said about Los is that in *Jerusalem*, "Los is now the hero." The balance of creative and destructive forces in Blake's works needs fuller exposition.

The bibliography is problematic since Blake's works are given without indication of the number of editions he printed or the variation in plate arrangement, a fact that should not be left out even for a neophyte. The list of critical works is fairly complete but indifferently annotated.

In 1799 the Reverend Dr. Trusler insulted Blake by suggesting that the artist needed someone to "elucidate" his ideas. Blake rejoined: "That which can be

made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care." As teachers of Blake we are on perilous ground unless our own instruction is calculated to "rouze the faculties [of our students] to act." In bringing a class beyond *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (and back again) it does help to set up some guideposts and do some unabashed elucidating, but I do not believe the day should be spent in endless distinctions between shadows and spectres. Blake's picture-poems work magic if they are experienced visually and aurally. For those who need explanation without oversimplification I still recommend Albert Roe's chapter on "Blake's Symbolism" in *The Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). After that, as they say on the shores of Lake Udan Adan, you are on your own.

Jerome J. McGann. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983. x + 172 pp. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* is an important, if sometimes disappointing, book. Concentrating on recent academic discussions of Romanticism, McGann finds the present scholarly approach to Romanticism "so ignorant or forgetful of its subject, so intent upon its own productive process, that it seems capable of any sort of nonsense" (18). In place of the "loose critical thinking" (29) that presumably governs our current understanding of Romanticism, McGann proposes a "critical" or "historical" investigation indebted to Heine's *The Romantic School* and Marx's *The German Ideology* as well as to work of Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Pierre Machery, Terry Eagleton, and Galvano Della Volpe. Though incomplete and, in places, vague, McGann's argument is nonetheless forceful and deserves the atten-

tion of anyone interested in English Romanticism and the institutional underpinnings of academic criticism.

According to McGann, "the Romantic ideology" is that poetry can rise above the material circumstances that occasion it. Romantic poetry, as McGann sees it, is marked by various acts of "displacement," "idealization," "evasion," "erasure," "attenuation," and "occlusion," all aimed at "disguising" the historical realities that the poet wants to transcend. In a provocative reading of "The Ruined Cottage" and "Tintern Abbey," two of McGann's many examples, he argues that Wordsworth characteristically grounds his work in historical fact. "The Ruined Cottage," as Wordsworth indicated in his Fenwick note, deals with the depression of the weaving industry in southwest England in 1793, and "Tintern Abbey," as the title states, revisits on 13 July 1798 a ruined abbey first visited in the summer of 1793. In each case, the setting involves strife and contradiction, the abbey, for example, serving in the 1790s as "a favorite haunt of transients and displaced persons" (86). In "Tintern Abbey," the juxtaposition of the "pastoral farms" with the "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" illustrates what McGann calls "an ominous social and economic fact of the period: that in 1793 no great distance separated the houseless vagrant from the happy cottager, as 'The Ruined Cottage' made so painfully clear" (86). Wordsworth, however, evokes these troubled settings only to replace them with permanent "forms of beauty" visible to the imaginative eye that sees through transitory appearances (here, the ruined abbey) into the timeless "life of things." By the end of the poem, "the mind," in short, "has triumphed over its times," leaving us "only with the initial scene's simplest natural forms: 'these steep woods and lofty cliffs, And this green pastoral landscape' [158-9]. Everything else has been erased—the abbey, the beggars and displaced vagrants, all that

civilized culture creates and destroys, gets and spends. We are not permitted to remember 1793 and the turmoil of the French Revolution, neither its 1793 hopes nor—what is more to the point for Wordsworth—the subsequent ruin of these hopes" (88).

In McGann's opinion, this apparent victory of poetry over history is an illusion, in Marxist terms an example of "ideology" or "false consciousness," that Romantic poetry itself exposes. The unmasking of the Romantic ideology takes place, first, in the oeuvre of each poet (with the possible exception of Blake, a point to which I will return). The destruction elided in "Tintern Abbey," for example, reappears in "Peele Castle," making the latter poem a "palinode" to Wordsworth's earlier poetic faith" (99). Similarly, "Constancy to an Ideal Object," in McGann's view, "passes a most devastating judgment upon Coleridge's cherished belief that the realm of ideas provides a ground for reality" (107). And in the final movement of *Don Juan*, Byron's poetry, too, "discovers what all Romantic poems repeatedly discover: that there is no place of refuge, not in desire, not in the mind, not in imagination" (145).

In a useful discussion of the phases of English Romanticism, McGann further suggests that progressive disillusionment informs the Romantic movement as a whole. Written before the Reign of Terror and the oppressive English reaction to the Revolution, early Romantic works such as Blake's *Songs* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* did not have to "bring their own dialectical stance into question" (108). That stance, qualified but apparently never abandoned in later works like *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, remains "allied to a polemic on behalf of the special privilege of poetry and art," ascribing to them "a special insight and power over the truth" (70). In the second phase of Romanticism, from 1789–1808, confidence in the transcendental powers of poetry began to ebb in "Peele Castle," "Limbo," and other works "already laden with self-critical and revisionist elements" (109). In the years of reaction that characterize the third phase of Romanticism, "Blake fell silent, Wordsworth fell asleep, and Coleridge fell into his late Christian *contemptus*. The second generation of Romantics, however, fashioned from these evil times a new set of poetic opportunities" (116). Dominated by Byron, third-phase Romanticism is "so deeply self-critical and revisionist that its ideology—in contrast to Blake, Wordsworth, and the early Coleridge—has to be defined in negative terms: nihilism, cynicism, anarchism" (110). The illusion that poetry can free us from history and culture—again, for McGann, the "Romantic ideology," or "the grand illusion of every Romantic poet" (137)—is thus questioned by the very poetry that wishes to affirm it.

Even though later Romantic poets are accordingly more disillusioned than their predecessors, in McGann's

view they are not for that reason better poets. Each phase of Romanticism seems to him an honest response—perhaps the only possible "critical" response—to the historical conditions that inspire it. The failure of the French Revolution, in other words—not poetic ability—separates Byron from Blake. Shelley's "idealism," Byron's "sensationalism," and Keats's "aestheticism"—all variants of the Romantic ideology that these same writers go on to criticize—remain "displaced yet fundamental vehicles of cultural analysis and critique: a poetry of extremity and escapism which is the reflex of the circumstances in which their work, their lives, and their culture were all forced to develop" (117). If McGann, then, is not urging us to dismiss these poets as purveyors of false consciousness, neither does he want us to emulate them. He hopes that we will see their work as a "human," "concrete," and "unique" reaction to special circumstances. Dating Romantic poetry in this way, he argues, does not leave it dated, or irrelevant to present concerns. In fact, the differences between past and present can remind us that our own ideologies are also "time and place specific" (2), not immutable truths grounded in nature or some other ostensibly transhistorical order. In McGann's words,

We do not contribute to the improvement of social conditions or even to the advancement of learning—insofar as scholars improve or advance anything outside the field of scholarship—by seeking to erase this difference [between past and present], but rather by seeking to clarify and promote it. When critics perpetuate and maintain older ideas and attitudes in continuities and processive traditions they typically serve only the most reactionary purposes of their societies, though they may not be aware of this; for the cooptive powers of a vigorous culture like our own are very great. (2)

In chastising critics who preserve "older ideas," McGann presumably has in mind writers like M.H. Abrams (in *Natural Supernaturalism*), Anne Mellor (in *English Romantic Irony*), and L.J. Swingle (in "On Reading Romantic Poetry"), all of whom, in McGann's opinion, take the Romantic ideology at face value. (Strangely enough, McGann does not mention Northrop Frye, surely the most influential twentieth-century literary critic indebted to English Romanticism.) Each of these critics protects the Romantic ideology mainly by dismissing criticism of it as "non-Romantic." Abrams, for example, goes so far as to exclude Byron's "ironic counter-voice" from *Natural Supernaturalism*, an excision that Mellor laments but does not to McGann's satisfaction repair. Ignoring the Romantics' self-criticism, these critics think that Romantic poetry achieves the transcendence of history that it desires. In McGann's view, these scholars therefore neglect not only the historical limits of Romanticism but also the transitory status of the "Ideological State Apparatuses" that their scholarship unwittingly serves. Deploring the "reactionary" and "uncritical" consequences of such criticism, McGann con-

cludes that "to generate a polemic for Romantic poetry on its own ideological terms" (as Abrams and Mellor supposedly do) "at this point in time is to vitiate criticism and to court mere intellectual sentiment. . . . Today no criticism of the Romantic Movement can seek to be 'free of non-Romantic notions' if it means to be taken seriously as criticism" (37-38). By "non-Romantic notions," McGann means, among other things, the time-bound character of art, the cornerstone of the historical/critical method that he is advocating.

I will leave to others the task of disputing the minute particulars of the argument that I have been summarizing. (I suspect that McGann's unruffled portrait of Blake will nettle many readers of *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, especially those readers influenced by deconstruction, a theory I will turn to momentarily.) I am more concerned here with the vagueness of the connections that McGann is trying to make. He fails to explain why "the Romantic ideology" continues to dominate academic criticism and what "reactionary purposes" academic critics consequently serve. Put differently, he never tells us what academic critics get in exchange for espousing the "illusion" that art is timeless.

A more persuasive account would not only spell out the class interests that motivate the "ideology" that McGann is criticizing. Such an account would also specify the historical developments that have allowed McGann to see further into Romanticism than Abrams, say, or Mellor. McGann repeatedly argues that just as Romantic poetry reflects "the determinate limits of specific social structures" (157), "the theory and practise of criticism reflect the authority of the university's complex ideological structures" (158). The question arises, then, what "social structures" permit McGann's liberation from the delusions that grip his contemporaries? Put bluntly, how can the Doris and Henry Dreyfuss Professor of Humanities at the California Institute of Technology be exempt from the Romantic illusions that, by his own admission, not only distorted his own early work on Byron but continue to mislead the academic profession?

Instead of answering these questions, McGann tries to disarm them by suggesting that his point of view is not as privileged as I am making it out to be. "Needless to say," he writes at one point, "I am not suggesting here that the ideological polemic of criticism should be sacrificed to a (spurious) critical objectivity, or vice versa" (30). I take McGann to be saying here that he is not writing from some supra-ideological (i.e. objective) vantage point: he therefore cannot be touched by the accusation that he escapes his own premises, in particular his assumption that all thought takes place "within concrete and specific Ideological State Apparatuses" that constrain it. This disclaimer, however, seems to me disingenuous, or, at the very least, seemingly at odds with statements he makes elsewhere, when he claims,

for example, that the historical investigation of poetry "permits us a brief objective glimpse at our world and our selves" (66), or that Byron's "poetry triumphs in its hedonism . . . whereas the objective world which it mirrors merely suffers and inflicts" (130). Far from being a charade, objectivity in these statements seems to characterize the discoveries of the historical method that McGann is championing.

As Marx saw, the very definition of ideology or false consciousness presupposes a norm, namely, true consciousness. Marx usually called this norm "science"; he also, I should add, identified the historical preconditions of his own "scientific" viewpoint: "The theoretical conclusions of the Communists," he wrote with Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, "are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes," that movement of course being the division of society into "two great hostile camps," the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. I am not arguing that Marx correctly interpreted his age. My point is that the comprehensiveness of his project depended on his giving it a suitable "material basis," to borrow another one of his favorite terms. Similarly, McGann, like Marx, needs not only to identify the social structures that distort his adversaries' conclusions but also the State Apparatus that enables his own.

McGann's book is incomplete in yet another way: he says nothing about such works as J. Hillis Miller's review of *Natural Supernaturalism* ("Tradition and Difference," *Diacritics*, 2 [1972], Tilottama Rajan's *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*, Paul de Man's "Shelley Disfigured" and "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*, and Jonathan Culler's "The Mirror Stage," a deconstruction of *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Influenced by the ideas of Jacques Derrida, all of these works, like McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, aim in part at opening up academic discourse and challenging received notions of Romanticism.¹ In addition, Miller and the other critics I have mentioned also raise serious questions about the very possibility of historical criticism, McGann's alternative to the scholarship that he criticizes. It should not be necessary here to review these by now familiar questions or to defend their importance. I will only say that a book like McGann's, conceived in light of "the post-New Critical academic situation" (153), ought to confront these questions if only, it may be, to defuse them.

In his preface McGann notes that *The Romantic Ideology*, along with his concurrently published *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* and a recently written sequence of essays, "comprises the initial parts of a com-

prehensive project which seeks to explain and restore an historical methodology to literary studies" (ix). Much of *The Romantic Ideology*, in fact, reads like an introduction reliant on generalizations that one hopes the author will substantiate and perhaps qualify. I say this not to dismiss the book, only to indicate its limits. I sympathize with McGann's desire to restore historical self-consciousness to Romantic scholarship and, more generally, to academic criticism. *The Romantic Ideology* affirms this goal

but does not, however, achieve it.

¹ All of these critics, like McGann, regard *Natural Supernaturalism* as a canonical text. In "Rationality and Imagination in Cultural History," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Spring, 1976), 447-64—a discussion of *Natural Supernaturalism* that McGann should acknowledge—Abrams answers some of these critics and defends his omission of Byron.

DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

A Re-View of Some Problems in Understanding Blake's *Night Thoughts*

John E. Grant

I. On the Reproductions in the Clarendon Edition

Like other scholars, the editors of the Clarendon edition of Blake's water colors and engravings for *Night Thoughts* were disappointed with the overall quality of the 800 reproductions in our massive two-volume edition published in 1980. Neither the color nor the black and white reproductions are, on average, commendable, though neither their shortcomings nor those of the lengthy, mostly factual Introduction should be seriously misleading, particularly for readers who are aware that in most art books the reproductions are untrustworthy. Our edition has been fortunate to have received some of the most detailed reviews ever devoted to an edition of Blake's pictures. My aim in this response is not to defend the Clarendon edition where it is indeed deficient but to clarify standards and deviations from them.

I believe the broader descriptive and interpretive issues I shall discuss should be aired now, before our projected commentary is completed. I shall first examine instances—some critiques of the reproductions, others of the editorial matter—in which the edition is not, in fact, deficient in the ways or to the extent alleged. In the second part of this essay, I shall discuss some key pictures in the *Night Thoughts* series that require more thorough exposition than they have received heretofore. The commentary, when it finally appears, will not be

the proper forum for detailed discussion of several points I shall raise. Furthermore, some of the issues I shall address extend beyond the specific problems of the Clarendon edition of *Night Thoughts* to larger questions of how Blake's visual works can be presented and understood. This re-view of the Clarendon edition should make it easier for readers to use the edition in ways that will advance scholarship on Blake's most extensive project of pictorial criticism.

For two reasons I have not attempted to develop a committee defense of the Clarendon edition. First, despite our numbers, the Clarendon editors—E.J. Rose, M.J. Tolley, D.V. Erdman, and I—do not constitute a party. Though my fellow editors are aware of my thinking, they have not endorsed this text as a joint position paper. Second, it is easier from a single point of view to establish the necessary distinctions between the kinds of problems in the edition and specific allegations of inadequacy that have erroneously been made by reviewers. I shall freely acknowledge many shortcomings in the edition which I had much responsibility for designing—some of which seem to have escaped the notice of reviewers.

The Clarendon edition has been reviewed at length by distinguished Blake scholars, and these reviews have greatly expanded the volume of significant commentary on the *Night Thoughts* designs. Detlef Dörrbecker's exceptionally specific negative review in *Blake* (1982) offers a detailed set of assertions as to where the reproductions went wrong and judges that the Introduction suffers as a result of too great a fondness for Blake's work. Dörrbecker's concluding quotation—of some severe thoughts on scholarly procedures I had written years ago in the first volume of this journal—suggests that he intended to stimulate corrective debate about matters of fact and interpretation. Other especially noteworthy critiques include Morton D. Paley's detailed, somewhat less unfavorable review (1982) and W.J.T. Mitchell's decidedly unfavorable review (1982), which addresses some interpretative problems. These may be weighed against such favorable reviews as those by Jean H. Hagstrum (1982) and Karen Mulhallen (1981). In the aggregate, the re-