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R E V I E W

Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context*

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Blind Girl," Constable's "Salisbury Cathedral, From the Meadows," Wordsworth's "Michael" and Tennyson's "Enoch Arden," that persuasively develops into the provocative suggestion that Victorian art asks us to stand back and see clearly one meaning, while Romantic art engages us in that very flux of experienced sensation that denies clarity of meaning. He further suggests that Victorian art, in its emphasis on making the reader see, is closer to Modern art than is Romantic art and also, he might have added, looking back at Lipking's essay, to eighteenth-century pictorial art.

The three essays on Blake's "composite art" (Hagstrum's term, of course) will be of special interest to readers of *Blake*. Ronald Paulson's discussion of "Blake's Revolutionary Tiger" usefully situates the poem within the context of an anti-jacobin rhetoric that frequently identified the bestial French revolutionaries as tigers but falls into that strong mis-reading heralded by Harold Bloom and represents the voice of the poem as that of the outraged Burke. While Paulson's essay contains several scattered insights, it too closely resembles a patchwork quilt of pieces stitched together haphazardly from other essays and fails to develop a cogent argument of its own.

Morton Paley's study of Blake's use of architecture, both as visual structure and as symbol, masterfully documents an important and unjustifiably neglected dimension of Blake's thought and practice. He first surveys the seven periods of architectural styles that appear in Blake's works, Egyptian, Eastern, Classical, Druid, Gothic, Baroque and contemporary, and carefully defines the meaning each style had for Blake, usefully adding the caveat that in many cases, the meaning of a given style depends on its pictorial context—this is particularly true of Blake's use of neoclassical motifs. Paley then examines the significance of particular architectural types, such as altars, walls, stairways (spiritually spiral or oppressively slab), doorways, superstructures, and cottages, and concludes with an insightful discussion of Golgonooza and the city of Jerusalem as the perpetually rebuilding Temple and Tabernacle of Christ.

W.J.T. Mitchell's analysis of the vortex as both iconic image and structuring form in the work of Hogarth, Turner and Blake brilliantly traces the transformation of the vortex from Hogarth's S-line of beauty, carefully contained within a stable neoclassical form, through Turner's identification of the vortex with the very flux of chaotic nature, showing that the vortex functions in Turner's art simultaneously as structural pattern and as a signifier of perpetual death and renewal, most notably in his great late paintings of the Deluge and the Apocalypse. Mitchell then discusses Blake's all-encompassing vortex as both the contrary and the instrument of vision, manifested most seminally in "Newton" and the text of *Milton*. After commenting on the

Vorticists' transformation of the vortex as a kind of image into every image as a kind of vortex, Mitchell reminds us that "image-magic operates not just at the explicit level of iconographic representation, but in those structures or spaces that organize the way we think about history, logic, or the human condition itself. The demystification of these subliminal idolatries will be the goal of a truly historical iconology." The essays in this handsomely illustrated volume have made some notable progress toward this goal, a goal that Jean Hagstrum himself, albeit in different terms, established for us. For the sister arts, this process of demystification is doubly complex, since it requires that we bring to consciousness not only what has been thought but the very shapes—both aural and visual—in which that thinking has occurred.

Stewart Crehan. *Blake in Context*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press [Dublin: Gill and Macmillan], 1984. 364 pp. \$47.50

Reviewed by Stuart Peterfreund

The context to which Stewart Crehan's title refers is specified in the introduction to his study, which has as its "main concern . . . the social and historical context within which an artist such as Blake emerges, and how this context makes necessary a revolution in artistic form and practice" (p. 13). Writers such as Bronowski, Schorer, and above all, Erdman, have dealt with precisely this context, but not, apparently, to Crehan's satisfaction. In his view, the discussion of Blake's artistic form and practice has been dominated by "formalists" such as Erdman and Anne K. Mellor (see pp. 240-45), who hold power in the academy and insist that the ideology in Blake's art be de-emphasized or ignored outright. Crehan's conception of his mission, then, much like Edward Said's conception of the deconstructionist enterprise (see "The Problem of Textuality," *Critical Inquiry*, 4 [1978], 673-714), is that of a rescue, a recapturing of scholarly territory held by hostile colonialist forces. In Crehan's own words, "As long as the formalists continue to hold sway in all discussions of art and literature, the historical materialist approach will repeatedly stress art's historical and class content, guided by an understanding of the primacy of social laws over artistic ones" (p. 13).

The preceding quotation suggests what Crehan elsewhere states forthrightly: the basis of his approach to Blake is Marxist, carried out with the intent of study-

ing Blake as a case in point "in order to explore certain problems and develop a method of analysis" (p. 12). Though historical, Crehan's approach is not, strictly speaking, chronological, either in the sense of being narrative or developmental in any larger sense. Crehan defends his choice of historical focus with the same sort of proleptic pugnacity he exhibits in his animadversions against the "formalists." Responding to the charge, not leveled by anyone but himself, that the chapters of the book, lacking broad focus or narrative continuity, may lend themselves to being read as discrete essays, Crehan states that the synchronic is as valid an approach to historical issues as the diachronic, which is apparently the approach of choice for the Blake establishment.

I am not a "Blakean" and do not subscribe to any cultist appreciation of his work. I have tried to explain Blake's famed 'uniqueness' in historical terms—taking the poetry and the visual art together—rather than leaving it an inexplicable mystery. If I am consequently accused of reductionism, of overstressing art's "subsidiary role in social process" [quoting Leon Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution*] and hence of neglecting art's inherent laws, then this is because there are too many books on Blake that analyse the art, poetry and ideas (especially the ideas) and forget the social process. (pp. 12-13)

Tellingly enough, neither at this juncture nor at any other point subsequent to it does Crehan undertake the sort of systematic critique that his introductory comments virtually beg for.

Ten chapters follow the introductory comments. The first of these, "The Romantic Artist," attempts to situate Blake as a case in point of "the Romantic artist" who "begins to appear at the moment when feudal social relations are decisively challenged," Blake's particular "moment" lasting three quarters of a century during "the period of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (1776-1848)" (p. 16). Crehan argues that the result of such revolution is freedom, especially in the realm of art, where Blake "pushed the freedom principle further than any other English Romantic poet, even to the extent of writing a free verse poem—the first of its kind in English" (p. 30). The poem Crehan has in mind is *Jerusalem*, which supposedly makes good Blake's intention to move away from the decasyllabic line and thus avoid "any 'Augustan' relapse into some easy, confident expectation or passive observation" (p. 31). As the basis for his claim that *Jerusalem* both attains a new level of formal freedom and apotheosizes "the Romantic revolt against metrical restrictions" (p. 34), Crehan cites much of the concluding paragraph of the prefatory third plate of *Jerusalem*, entitled "To the Public." On the basis of Blake's statement, Crehan concludes that "the revolt against 'fettered' verse and the ordered, rational world-view, begins, if it begins anywhere, with Blake" (p. 35). What Crehan does not seem to realize is that most of what Blake has to say in the paragraph under discussion refers, in a highly self-conscious manner, to the statement entitled

"The Verse" which prefaces *Paradise Lost*. If Blake really intends to repudiate the poetic past, including the Miltonic source of his very words of repudiation, Blake does so more in the service of convention than in the service of freedom, authenticating his vision in relation to his poetic precursors just as Milton had authenticated his vision in relation to his precursors. For example, Blake's repudiation of "a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming," as "a necessary and indispensable part of verse," echoes Milton's repudiation of rhyme itself. "This neglect then of Rime so little is to be taken as a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming."

The direction in which Milton seeks freedom from modern constraints is toward the past—the classical past in *Paradise Lost* and, ultimately, the hebraic past in *Paradise Regained*, in which Milton redeems himself in Blake's eyes from any imputation of succumbing to the idolatry of classicism. The point of Blake's comments is likewise to indicate that he is seeking freedom from modern constraints in the past, and avoiding the enticements of classicism that temporarily seduced Milton by going directly to the hebraic source. Specifically, Blake in his comments embraces perhaps the most ancient of poetic conceptions, that of *mashal*, defined by Robert Lowth in his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (tr. 1787): "The word *Mashal* . . . denotes resemblance, and is therefore directly expressive of the figurative style, as far as the nature of figures consists in the substitution of words, or rather of ideas, for those which they resemble. . . ." As with style, so with substance: it may well be, as Crehan argues, that Blake's formal revolt can be linked to his revolt against Enlightenment rationalism; but Blake's revolt, though "not . . . simply against rational analysis and the general laws of science *per se*, but against their *social consequences*" (p. 46; Crehan's emphasis), is a backward-looking action rather than a forward-looking one. As a notebook poem like "Mock On Mock On Voltaire Rousseau" makes clear, the cure for such rationalism is hebraic vision, not bourgeois or popular revolution. Indeed, one could make a similar argument for the very marxist program with which Crehan attempts to understand Blake. The final stage of the socialist revolution, with its harmonization of abilities and needs, is a lot closer to the situation Blake describes as the "sands along the Red sea shore/Where Israel's tents do shine so bright" than it is to the situation of the French Republic, either before or after the rise of the Jacobins.

I have devoted a perhaps inordinate amount of space to a discussion of Crehan's first chapter because that

chapter both illustrates his strategy of argument throughout the book and illustrates the rather severe limitations of the strategy. In virtually every case, Crehan meditates on one or more texts that, for him, identify the social issues informing Blake's artistic milieu and practice alike. Crehan then moves rapidly from the text to the sociohistorical context—the French Revolution in particular and the age of revolution in general, in the case of the first chapter. When he has moved to the sociohistorical context, which is finally what he wants to talk about, Crehan glosses that context (and less often than not, the text with which he began) with some broadly marxist truism that is based on a less broad but universally applicable marxist truth. For example, in a discussion of *Jerusalem* 91.18–30, Crehan brings two passages from *Capital* to bear on 11.26–27 (“You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you / May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law”) and explains that the lines have to do with “the creative ‘soul’ of the worker himself. . . . Only through accumulating particular individuals within factories, where ‘one man’s business’ has been reduced to ‘one simple question,’ can modern capitalist accumulation take place” (p. 50). What Blake is actually talking about is the effect of pharisaical codification on one’s perception of divinity in the world, the sort of codification that Jesus fought against and in doing so presented the example that Albion ultimately follows in *Jerusalem*. Blake’s dark mill-wheels, having more to do with Aristotle’s *Analytics* than Arkwright’s looms, are nowhere to be found in the passage Crehan discusses. There is nothing to say that a marxist homily cannot be as good as a Jewish or Christian one, but good homiletics demands first and foremost the selection of a good anecdote or text: Crehan’s text has nothing to do with his point, which here and elsewhere overwhelms the particular Blakean text of choice.

Thus the second chapter, “The Artist in the City,” seeks to bring into some correlation Blake’s reaction to the capitalist and geopolitical expansion of London in his lifetime and Engels’ subsequent reaction to London, the point being to illustrate that what is for Blake “the possibility of *imaginatively* breaking out of the system” (p. 84; Crehan’s emphasis) is for Engels the possibility of analytically and politically breaking out of the system. “London” is the text of choice. The same sort of procedure characterizes subsequent chapters. The third chapter, “Radical Innocence,” uses *Songs of Innocence* to demonstrate that even in these apparently sweet and innocent poems, Blake is radicalizing his readers against the likes of Isaac Watts and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who would, in their own children’s literature, turn their young readers into well-behaved homunculi and capitalist dupes. The fourth chapter, “The Politics of Experience,” uses the title of R.D. Laing’s book, cited

elsewhere with approval by Crehan (see pp. 305, 307), to suggest that Blake, in *Songs of Experience*, accomplishes something of the same kind of breakthrough that Laing reports of the inmates of his Tavistock Clinic. Blake moves from innocence and illusion to experience and a sense of play rather than disillusion: “. . . the songs express not ‘disillusionment’ or a cynical awareness of social and psychological realities, but a new dialectical awareness” (p. 122; Crehan’s emphasis).

Crehan’s fifth chapter, “Blake’s Tyger and the ‘Tygerish Multitude,’” is probably the best of the book. Here Crehan has a genuine context—that of anti-Jacobin discourse, contemporaneous with and accessible to Blake—in which to situate Blake’s poem. Despite a broad context of anti-Jacobin discourse equating the revolutionary masses of France with tigers and tigerish multitudes, Crehan remains sensitive to the nuances and ambiguities of the poem, not trying to reduce it to the sum of its allusions or sources, while at the same time suggesting how they do inform a reading of “The Tyger.” In addition to its contribution to our historical perspective on Blake’s “Tyger,” the chapter is notable for its brevity and the virtual absence of dialectical wrangling.

Not so with the next four chapters, which attempt to view Blake’s art both as social document and in the context of a theory of artistic production: moreover, in undertaking their attempt, these chapters make good on Crehan’s introductory threat to “stress art’s historical and class content, guided by an understanding of the primacy of social laws over artistic ones” (p. 13). At its best and brightest, this approach gives us a document like Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being*, which explains John Davies and Herbert of Cheshire, but not Donne or Shakespeare *as artists*. Used by Crehan, the approach gives us an analysis of how Blake attained artistic autonomy that depends for its point on a comparison of Blake to William Sharp, “a friend . . . and a follower of the millenarian Richard Brothers and later of Joanna Southcott . . . whose struggle for independence (not wholly achieved in terms of an original art, however) closely parallels that of Blake, and tells us something about the conflict between ‘producers’ and ‘devourers’ within the print trade itself” (p. 150). Although Crehan’s book probably went to press before he could frame and incorporate a rebuttal of Morris Eaves’ *William Blake’s Theory of Art* (1982) in his own arguments, he seems completely oblivious (or willfully impervious) to earlier statements by Eaves that seek at once to understand how Blake’s situation motivated him to attain artistic autonomy and the uniqueness of that attainment. In “What Is the ‘History of Publishing?’” (*Publishing History*, 2 [1977], 57–77), Eaves declares “Blake’s artistic decision to become an independent publisher . . . a landmark in the history of publishing, not because he was the first or last to make that decision, but because he was far

more aware than most others of why he was doing it" (p. 76). From this insight it is possible to develop a coherent and consistent theory of artistic production, which is at the same time sensitive to nuances of context and faithful to Blake as an individual. Eaves succeeds in his book, while Crehan fails in his.

The reasons for Crehan's failure, suggested from virtually his first paragraph, are clearly evident in his book's tenth and final chapter "Jerusalem and Albion." Here Crehan seeks to show that the aptness of his social and artistic analysis rests on a hitherto undiscussed tradition of working-class English radical protestantism that exhorts its followers to a life of inspired artisanship for the spiritual redemption of the world. To paraphrase Voltaire (in the infernal sense, of course), if radical protestantism had not existed, Blake, Marx (perhaps), and Crehan (certainly) would have found it necessary to invent in order to promulgate a dialectical changing of the -isms. In his pishah-vision, Crehan sees context as Adam saw history in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*: "The context of Blake's utopian vision is a transition from millenarism and communitarianism to the utopian socialist experiments of the St-Simonians and Owenites" (p. 330). Notably absent in Crehan's discussion is any reference to Harold Fisch's *Jerusalem and Albion* (1964), which would have forced Crehan to address spiritual as well as social issues. Nor is there, despite the bandying about of the idea of millenarianism, any reference to Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957; 1961). Nor is there even a passing reference to the analysis of the same transformation that Crehan argues for that is found in M.H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971).

And these are hardly the only oversights: if not Eaves, then why not include the work of marxists such as Lucien Lefebvre and Pierre Macherey who have already come to grips with the issue of how to articulate a marxist theory of artistic production? Why not include a broader sampling of those formalist critics sent up from the start, if only to rebut them on matters of substance? In the final analysis, as the appended bibliography shows, Crehan's book is either a thinly researched dissertation, a badly updated one, or some combination of these. It may not be possible to gain access to eighteenth-century rare books at the University of Zambia, where he teaches, but Crehan surely could have taken the trouble to buttress his arguments with more evidence of careful and reputable research. To do so would not have mitigated the sting of the gratuitous nastiness that abounds in the book. My special selection in this regard is taken from Crehan's analysis of Blake's color-printed monotype *Newton*: "the whole body curves in upon itself, hunching itself into an embryo-like ball (the characteristic position of all intellectuals) . . ." (p. 165). Come the revolution, I trust the bureaucracy of

the proletariat will help me and my fellow sufferers to shake off the chains of our scholarship—and scoliosis.

One finally wonders why someone in the academy would do everything in his power to *épater* his version of *les bourgeois*—even to ridicule them—without doing his level best to make sure that in the aftermath he edified them by edifying himself to the greatest possible extent. Crehan's is an angry, inept, and ultimately saddening effort. Marxist approaches to Blake do not have to be so—David Punter's *Blake, Hegel, and Dialectic* (1982) is a case in point. And a marxist approach to Blake's theory and practice of artistic production could be richly edifying. But such an approach has not yet been tried successfully, Crehan's *Blake in Context* notwithstanding.

William Blake. *Annotations to Richard Watson. An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine*. 8th ed. 1797. Edited with an Introduction by G. Ingli James. Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1984. Pp. vii + [170].

Reviewed by Nicholas O. Warner

Among the most striking and eloquent of his annotations to other writers are Blake's comments on Bishop Watson's *An Apology for the Bible*, itself a reply to the second part of Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Many Blake scholars have found it useful to cite portions of these vivid, often angry annotations, resounding as they do with the voice of honest indignation, and frequently anticipating issues present in Blake's later prophetic books. These annotations have, of course, been available in the great editions of Keynes, Bentley, and Erdman, but G. Ingli James's new edition of the annotations presents them for the first time in facsimile, and with a typographic transcription that follows the actual disposition of Blake's words.

James's edition, published in the Regency Reprint series by University College Cardiff Press, begins with a learned, lucid, engagingly written introduction, in which James points out that a facsimile of the annotations "makes visually evident the expressive vigour of Blake's comments." James goes on to give us some background information about Watson and his career as Bishop of Llandaff, and about Blake's intellectual relationship to both Watson and Paine; James also distinguishes carefully not only between Watson's "Whiggish liber-