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John Beer, Blake's Humanism

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REVIEW

Blake's Humanism by John B. Beer.
Barnes and Noble (1968), pp [xiii]+269 pp.

Blake's Humanism is a book disappointing in its unevenness; the excellences of certain passages are offset by the weaknesses of others. The critic at his best is very incisive indeed, as is shown by his exposition of the *Milton* in chapter six. Fifty pages of close, textually anchored criticism offer a considerable insight into the epic, insight attributable in large measure to the author's grasp, not only of Blake, but of John Milton as man and poet. In contrasting Milton to Blake's vision of him, Beer is able to convey an excellent sense of Blake's viewpoints and purposes in the epic. The thoroughness with which the author handles his comparison of Milton and Blake may be suggested by pointing out that the total of pages occupied by such discussion comes to a good quarter of the book. The author's lengthy discussion of *Milton* has been carefully anticipated in the second chapter, where the Miltonic vision is discussed in terms of the cosmic contraries of "energy" and "light." Beer stresses Blake's adaptation of these contraries to issues of his own age, ranging from Blake's dislike of atheistic rationalism to his concern over the social effects of the industrial revolution.

Beer's critical strengths are by no means confined to the *Milton*. Eleven pages of discussion of *The French Revolution* will prove welcome to students of Blake. Likewise, the author's comments on the *Songs* are often very perceptive. A quotation from Young's *Night Thoughts* sheds light upon "The Sick Rose," and Beer compares Una's lion in the *Faerie Queene* to the lion of "The Little Girl Found" to say something new about that challenging lyric.

But the book's better passages stand in contrast to some weak and misleading ones. Beer seems especially weak on the minor prophecies, where he reveals insufficient acquaintance both with the books and with current scholarship on them. For instance, when discussing the Thiralatha fragment the author assumes that "the illustration on the plate" is a direct comment upon the lines. The fragment is one which Blake "etched upon a plate and later cancelled." Beer disagrees with "Blake's editors" that "the words and design . . . were made on separate occasions." Yet the very fact that the lines were painted out would seem to make that conclusion inescapable.

In discussing the illustrations to *America A Prophecy*, Beer is either remarkably unobservant or is not beyond "bending" his description of individual plates to fit his interpretation. On plate five of *America*, he sees "a figure [which] leans down, looking into the spirals" of the serpent. This inverted figure, legs awry and body contorted, could be seen as plunging into the coils, but by what stretch of the imagination can it be seen as "leaning down?" Plate fifteen of *America* is said to show "women . . . consuming in flames which at top of the plate turn into fruit and foliage." But the tree at the top of the plate has neither fruit nor foliage. Rather, the uppermost scene shows a thistle, a dead tree wound with a parasitic vine, and a contracted figure similar to the one dominating *America's* last plate. Fruit (the grape) is seen in the first designs of the series, not the last. The progress is toward sterility, not fertility, but the plate's significance is obscured by an inaccurate description of the designs.

The criticism reaches its weakest with an interpretation of *America's* last plate. The dominant figure is "Urizen . . . stretched forward in peaceful death." Yet the most cursory glance at the plate shows the figure to be kneeling prostrate, hands folded. (Most critics would agree that it depicts the shadowy female as she appears in the "Preludium" to *Europe*, "drowned in shady woe.") In further discussion of *America's* last plate, the author sees "the tree of moral law [which] lies, destroyed." This design, reminiscent of a design on plate two, shows human forms contorted to tree trunks to symbolize man's entrapment in vegetative existence. But they are no more "destroyed" than is vegetative existence itself. The interpretation becomes even less convincing when the author argues that a plant illustration on this plate bears especial significance because it is "in the position occupied by a serpent two pages before"--namely, at the bottom position on the plate. (Does a relationship exist to ten or twelve other plates of *America*, because they also have designs at the bottom?)

The sometimes unconvincing quality of the author's exposition is not confined to the illustrations. The character Ariston, mentioned once in *America* and once in *The Song of Los*, becomes "sexual energy" at one point, "the genitals" at another, and finally comes to play an important part in a schema of "Divided Man." Heretofore, critics approaching Blake's two mentions of Ariston have drawn cautious conclusions on the basis of a king by that name in Herodotus, who seems to bear some relationship to Blake's character. In *Blake's Humanism*, even that slim evidence is neglected, and the interpretation can only be described as subjective.

The occasionally arbitrary quality of the author's exposition is carried over to some extent in the organization of the book. *Blake's Humanism* is a thematic study, one which explores only those works which contain "a point of social or political relevance which gives [them] a central theme." Those chapters of *Blake's Humanism* which explicate relevant themes in individual works, or groups of related works, are relatively easy for readers to follow. Chapters that discuss socio-political themes in Blake's work as a whole seem far less clear. The first chapter, so important to any thematic study in setting the thesis and plan of the book, seems neither clearly focused nor easy to follow, nor is the presentation of the book's thesis, plan, and goals given sufficient emphasis. The two concluding chapters seem neither sufficiently integrated in themselves, nor sufficiently knit to foregoing chapters to be as helpful as they might have been. Two appendices and an additional "Commentary on the Illustrations"--all three only loosely connected with the main text--seem to reveal the author's difficulties with the book's arrangement.

I found *Blake's Humanism* uneven in quality, unreliable at times, and without adequate focus. My final judgment fell far short of anticipations awakened in the book's opening pages ("S.F. Damon, M.O. Percival, and Northrop Frye . . . contain much that is valuable and exciting . . . , yet the total impression is always unsatisfactory"). Even so, *Blake's Humanism* will hold a place on my bookshelf for its perceptive study of Blake's debt to Milton, for its thoroughgoing exposition of Blake's *Milton*, and for discerning commentary on a number of individual poems.

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