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D I S C U S S I O N

Blake, Context and Ideology

Stewart Crehan

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10. Brown, David Blayney. "The Romantic Tradition: William Blake to Robin Tanner." *The Print in England, 1790-1930: A Private Collection*. Ed. Crat Fartley and Susan Ridyard. Cambridge, Cambs.: Fitzwilliam Museum, 1985. 40-69. [Works by Blake, Flaxman, and Palmer were included in this section; #53-108. An exhibition which drew on the holdings of the Robin Loder collection. See also #19, below.]

11. Burns, Bryan, Philip Dodd, and Vincent Newey. "The Nineteenth Century: Romantic Period." *The Year's Work in English Studies* 62 (1981). Ed. Laurin. London: Murray, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P. for the English Association, 1984. 277-307. See pp. 280-84 for a summary review of 1981. Blake scholarship by Newey; additional references are listed in the index of authors treated.

12. Burns, Bryan, Philip Dodd, and Vincent Newey. "The Nineteenth Century: Romantic Period." *The Year's Work in English Studies* 63 (1982). Ed. Laurin. London: Murray, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P. for the English Association, 1985. 277-307. See pp. 278-81 for Vincent Newey's summary review.

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I would argue that the confounding of Gog by the descent of the new Jerusalem is the visionary Fable that gives center to the meaning of the design. Having recognized that Fable, we can if we wish proceed to allegorize it into a variety of contexts, as Blake himself did when he wrote that "Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion" (E 203). In the essay I explored briefly the contemporary political context as one possible meaning that could be fitted into the structure; certainly others are possible, and if Tolley wishes, in effect, to call Jerusalem Truth or Wisdom, I am content, though I hope he would allow Liberty as another name. As Blake wrote in a different but related context, "Tell me the Acts, O historian, and leave me to reason upon them as I please" (E 544).

Tolley suggests several designs with which I might have compared the design I discussed. At some level such comparisons can be very helpful, but too often easy analogies between surface elements leave the underlying structure of a design in darkness, as I have argued elsewhere happened with the color print known as *Hecate*. I therefore resist what seem premature attempts to get at the Vision by seeing every motif in a design in terms of Blakean motifs from other works. Specifically, the suggestion that I should have related this design to the Resurrection designs (nos. 1, 264) in the *Night Thoughts* series I find unhelpful. Both show a male, Jesus; the first shows him ascending, the position of the legs making the upward, gravity-defying surge quite clear (see Janet Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art*, 122-49). In contrast, the new Jerusalem, though the position of her arms is similar to that of the arms of Jesus in NT 1, has her left leg bent underneath her at the knee; the figure has no upward moving energy at all. The position of Gog in the design, moving and leaning towards the left, strongly implies that the female figure is descending and displacing him from the center. *Night Thoughts* 264, the second of Tolley's suggested comparisons, shows how Blake handles a figure in process of "manifesting;" it represents Jesus' head, arms, and upper torso emerging out of darkness towards the viewer. It bears no similarity at all to the drawing I discuss. Comparison with the account of the descent of Jesus in the Clouds of Ololon would seem equally unhelpful.

I thank Tolley for his commentary, but for the time being I stand by both my method and my reading of this particular work. I look forward with interest to whatever interpretation Tolley may in the future offer of this "obscure drawing" — though it is a moot point whether that adjective remains appropriate.

Blake, Context and Ideology

Stewart Crehan

Stuart Peterfreund's review of my *Blake in Context*, *Blake*, 19 (winter 1985-86), shows, once again, that while the liberal text can be encompassed and "deconstructed" by the Marxist text, the Marxist text can only be ignored or misread by the liberal text. Peterfreund begins by stating that writers such as Bronowski, Schorer, "and above all, Erdman," have already dealt with the social and historical context of Blake's poetry and art, "but not, apparently, to Crehan's satisfaction." Although I do not say so in the book, I did not find Bronowski's pioneering study satisfactory, though it was one of my starting points. Erdman's work was an inspiration, as will be evident from the references, and the fact that I followed Erdman in foregrounding the phrase "Republican Art," used as the title for chapter 8. The tone of Peterfreund's comment implies, however, that Bronowski, Schorer and Erdman have closed the case on the context issue, a fear I myself began to harbor until I realized that some areas (especially that of ideology) still needed to be explored, and that new approaches were possible. But Peterfreund oversteps the bounds of academic propriety when he attributes to me the view that "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." In the pages cited, Anne K. Mellor is not even mentioned, and nowhere do I attach the label "formalist" to Erdman, or to Mellor. Indeed, my criticism of Mellor's approach (pp. 260-62) is that it is not formalist enough: "Such a loose, generalising approach, which interprets 'the bounding line or enclosed form' as the work of an oppressive reason," fails to appreciate the fact that meaning, execution and design in Blake are subtly and necessarily interwoven" (p. 261). As for David Erdman, in a personal letter to me dated 21 January 1985, he graciously said of my book that it would help others writing on Blake "to get a better sense of Blake's context," and that "All of us who study and teach Blake will benefit — and our students especially — from your book. Thank you for writing it!" Had I regarded Erdman as some kind of establishment enemy, as Peterfreund tries to insinuate, it is highly unlikely that he would have responded so favorably.

A quotation from my discussion of metrics leads to a more serious misreading. Blake, I say, "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. 31). Peterfreund says: "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)." First, the poem Crehan has in mind is *not Jerusalem*, as is clear from the context. The poem he has in mind is the short free-verse Argument at the beginning of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which opens: "Rinrah roars," and is introduced on page 33: "The next stage, then, is free verse itself. . . ." Nowhere do I refer to *Jerusalem* as a "free verse poem." But Peterfreund evidently wants to put in my mind that which will serve his own project. *Jerusalem* (which I am supposed to champion as the apotheosis of formal freedom, against everything I say elsewhere) is used to advance Peterfreund's own undialectical approach to literary history. Concerning "To the Public," Peterfreund says: "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*." Why I should be thought unaware of such an obvious quotation is quite beyond me. Let me simply refer Peterfreund to my note on the same passage on page 249 of my *William Blake: Selected Poetry and Letters* (Pergamon, 1976), to clear him of any misapprehensions. Blake's self-conscious repudiation of blank verse involves both a repudiation of Milton and, at the same time, through the use of the phrase "modern bondage," a recognition of Milton's contribution towards such a metrical revolution. But the dialectics of transcendence are lost on Peterfreund, who sees both Blake's and Milton's metrical innovations simply as a return to the past. The key word here is "modern" (rather than "bondage").

"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." From details of metrics we have wandered into "vision." But this vision, according to Peterfreund, depends for its authenticity, within its own terms, not on Poetic Genius, or Imagination, or Inspiration, but on the Letter—on written tradition, and memory of that written tradition. According to Blake, "As a man is, So he Sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers. You certainly Mistake, when you say that the Visions of Fancy

are not to be found in This World. To Me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination. . . ." Peterfreund would presumably add that none of this was authentic for Blake until it had been stamped by the authority of certain "poetic precursors." While we are on this topic, do poets have given precursors, like people have ancestors? Or do poets select their own precursors? And if they select their own, in what sense are they a validating authority? Why, in particular, was Milton a precursor for Blake, rather than Pope or Shakespeare? What makes a poet anyhow? Peterfreund's glibness suddenly betrays an appalling superficiality.

Let us return to the text in question. What Milton says (and Peterfreund quotes) is that his rhyme-less poem should 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 invocation of ancient rights and liberties was, of course, the accepted rhetoric of the seventeenth-century parliamentary cause. Milton is proclaiming his verse as "the first" of its kind in English. In other words, as something *new*. In quoting "the Miltonic source of his very words of repudiation," Blake is not serving "convention," or tying himself to the past, but self-consciously placing his own work as the next stage in the metrical revolution after Milton, rejecting *blank verse itself* as "derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming." I had, I confess, thought all this too obvious to go into, not realizing that for some, nothing is obvious. (The comparisons I make between Miltonic and Blakean epic on pages 292-98 are a critical analysis of Blake's attempt to transcend Milton.)

Peterfreund's way of thinking is further illustrated when, referring to Enlightenment rationalism, he says: "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." Peterfreund does not explain his handy catchphrase. However, if it has anything to do with Mosaic law and the God of the Old Testament, we should bear in mind Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, where he defends a notable Enlightenment rationalist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine. (I ought to point out that I do not share Peterfreund's simplistic view of Blake's relationship to Enlightenment rationalism.) Paine, according to Blake, "only denies that God conversed with Murderers & Revengers such as the Jews were, & of course he holds that the Jews conversed with their own State Religion which they call'd God & so were liars as Christ says," adding: "That the Jews assumed a right Exclusively to the benefits of God will be a lasting witness against them & the same will it be against Christians." Not much "hebraic vision" there. But then it all depends what is meant by the phrase. In a late letter to

George Cumberland (12 April 1827) Blake speaks of "Newton's Doctrine of the Fluxions of an Atom, A Thing that does not Exist." However, the last stanza of the notebook poem cited by Peterfreund reads:

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.
(my emphasis)

Instead of simply denying the existence of atoms and particles, the poem imagines how, perceived from a synthesizing viewpoint, they are *transformed*. In the synthesizing vision, they "Are" Red Sea sands and shining tents; viewed prophetically, "every sand *becomes* a Gem" (stanza two). For Blake, the atomizing mentality justifies a social order in which "minute particulars" (human beings) are reduced and hardened into "grains of sand" — a profound critique, as I show on pages 78–84, of *both* analytical philosophy *and* the alienating isolation of the individual under the new capitalism. For the catchphrase "hebraic vision" to mean anything at all, it would have to include such a critique, one that relates, as I point out on page 41, to a major Blakean insight: the *ideological* nature of perception. For some reason, Peterfreund associates "the situation Blake describes as the 'sands along the Red sea shore / Where Israel's tents do shine so bright'" with the "final stage of the socialist revolution," i.e., the millennium. Why? Even if we accept that the lines allude to the Israelites' encampment *after* the crossing (Exodus in fact only mentions the Israelites encamping *before* the crossing), there is nothing necessarily millennial here. The Israelites still had a long way to go, and many difficulties to overcome, before they would see the Promised Land. On one level, then, the phrase "shine so bright" connotes faith in the certainty of final victory, rather than celebration of an achieved "final stage."

Peterfreund objects to the way I connect the lines: "You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you / May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law" with passages from *Capital*, informing us that what Blake "is actually talking about is the effect of pharasaical codification on one's perception of divinity in the world." Like Thomas A. Vogler, reviewing Morris Eaves' *William Blake's Theory of Art (Studies in Romanticism, 24 [summer 1985])*, I am always suspicious of those who, with an air of magisterial authority, tell us what Blake is "actually talking about." If the Blakean text were so transparent, Blakean criticism and interpretation would have dried up long ago. Blake's "actual" words are, in fact, merely given another pseudo-Blakean gloss by Peterfreund. Every "explanation" of the Peterfreund type thus leads to another: every decoding becomes another encoding. In this way, the tedious business of interpreting, paraphrasing and explaining to the

uninitiated what poets are "actually talking about" helps to keep the mill-wheels of the academy turning. While I do not claim that my own gloss mirrors more faithfully what Blake is "actually talking about" — I leave that to Peterfreund — I *would* claim that by placing the passage in which the quoted lines occur in the context of contemporary philosophical, scientific and economic discourse, I am at least able to suggest the historical and ideological resonances of the precise words used, namely: "accumulate," "Particulars," "analyzing," "aggregate," and "Moral Law." Instead of rewriting Blake, which invariably means concocting a prosaic pseudo-Blake ("the effect of pharasaical codification on one's perception of divinity in the world"), I tried, through the contextual approach, to show how the Blakean text *refracts* contemporary ideological discourses, grapples and battles with them, and seeks, through its various literary strategies, to absorb, criticize, and finally transcend them.

Blake in Context is, as Peterfreund obsessively reiterates, a Marxist analysis. Its faults I would now be the first to acknowledge, especially the tendency towards reductionism and "economistic" Marxism. Nevertheless, its discussion of visual art (praised by other critics as the most original part of the book) best demonstrates its thesis, and it may be for this reason that Peterfreund has chosen to completely ignore these crucial chapters. Instead, he pillories me for being "completely oblivious (or willfully impervious)" to earlier statements by Morris Eaves, notably an article in *Publishing History*, 2 (1977), which addresses one of the central concerns of my book: the artist as independent producer. Here I plead guilty. I did not know the article. What Eaves, quoted by Peterfreund, says, is that "Blake's artistic decision to become an independent publisher" was "a landmark in the history of publishing" because "he was far more aware than most others of why he was doing it." Nothing to argue with there. My own view, carefully elaborated throughout the book, is that Blake's independent stand was a radical yet logical extension of the Romantic project (the emergence of "a freely creating individual" whose source of creativity lies within his "own" personality and way of perceiving — what Caudwell calls the quintessential bourgeois illusion); a break with Tory patronage and Royalist norms; an attempt to "absorb the role of that spectre, the commercial middleman" (p. 16); a utopian reaction against the middle-class art market and the reduction of art to a commodity, a reaction that is also part of a new historical phenomenon — "the Radical, plebeian intellectual and self-educated artist or craftsman who is now emerging as a potent force for change" (pp. 143–44); a revival of the medieval illuminated manuscript tradition, combined with a conscious enhancement of the print, unparalleled in the history of art; a triumph of anti-illusionism, "visionary art" and the lin-

earist tradition, impossible without an independent stand; a craftist reaction, anticipating William Morris; an aesthetic revolution (unity and interdependence of text and illustration, word and image); a series of technical innovations (etching technique, color printing, etc.) foreshadowing Walter Benjamin's argument that any artistic challenge to the dominant production relations must also revolutionize "the techniques and forces of artistic production" (p. 242); an insistence on the unity of conception and execution, separated in the patron-protégé relationship, as with Hayley; an assertion of the central importance of creative labor, and so on. In sum: "Blake was always his own printer and bookseller—not out of some Crusoe-like, do-it-yourself crankiness, but for important artistic and ideological reasons" (p. 148).

Ignoring this analysis, Peterfreund says: "Eaves succeeds in his book, while Crehan fails in his." By way of reply, I would refer Peterfreund to Vogler's review of *William Blake's Theory of Art*, which "undoes" Eaves' text by revealing, and thus deconstructing, its recurrent metaphors of private property. Far from equipping us with a historically objective account of Romantic ideology, which *Blake in Context* explicitly attempts, these metaphors remain imprisoned in that ideology. As Jerome McGann says: "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations."¹ To quote Vogler: "Eaves' argument is thus informed by a paradigm of class structure which privileges the isolation and monadic autonomy of the bourgeois subject, and 'behind' his theory of art there would seem to be a theory of the subject in consumer or late monopoly capitalism."² One could go further: Eaves' 'monadic' paradigm is even given determinate form by the subject of Eaves' own discourse: William Blake.

We come, finally, to the most astonishing remark in Peterfreund's review: that in chapter 10 I seek to show "that the aptness of [my] social and artistic analysis rests on a hitherto undiscussed tradition of working-class English radical protestantism," and that if this tradition had not existed, "Blake, Marx (perhaps), and Crehan (certainly) would have found it necessary to invent" it! I am hardly the first to view Blake's work in the light of this radical, millenarian tradition. Denis Saurat began to do so as long ago as 1929. The many references in my book to Edward Thompson's classic study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, and to related work by A. L. Morton, Christopher Hill, Jack Lindsay, J. F. C. Harrison, and others, including David Erdman, are proof enough. One is left with the astonishing conclusion that Peter-

freund himself thinks that such a tradition has been "hitherto undiscussed." His remarks about having to invent it even indicate a certain careless indifference as to whether it existed or not. I would not insist that an intimate knowledge of this tradition is essential for readers of *Jerusalem*, or that writers of pseudo-Blake need to brush up on their working-class history to be clear on what Blake "is actually talking about." However, if I were ignorant of such a tradition, I would not feel particularly proud of the fact, especially if I claimed to know something about the Blakean millennium. Peterfreund evidently *is* proud, and for this he surely deserves an award of some kind. His attitude shows star quality.

Peterfreund's last little dart is that my book was written in Zambia (in fact, it was written in England) and needs buttressing with "more evidence of careful and reputable research." Dutiful, graduate-style buttressing was a preliminary stage, admittedly; after four or five years I was able to get rid of the scaffolding, and to resist the temptation to fill the book with counter-arguments and refutations. The task was not easy, but in Blake studies, one has to be selective. I decided, in other words, to let the argument speak for itself, to present my ideas in a distilled form, rather than playing the academic game, in the possibly naive belief that no amount of buttressing compensates for a poverty of ideas. The principle was this: that when a building is complete, the scaffolding is removed, and that when a wine is bottled, no sediment remains. If Peterfreund likes sediment in his wine, that is up to him. Likewise, should he wish, at some future date, to rifle my book for his own scholarly purposes without acknowledging his source (I particularly recommend the comparison between Blake's *Jerusalem* and Richard Brothers' *Description of Jerusalem* on pages 348-49), then that is also up to him. What he should not do is pretend, with First World arrogance, that he has something spiritually in common with Blake because he can trot out a phrase such as "hebraic vision." The school of Blake is a hard school, especially for reactionary academicians (whom Blake, we know, detested). For the likes of Peterfreund, who have made it their profession to twist revolutionary thought into its opposite, I doubt if it is possible to gain access to what Blake "was actually saying" at all, despite pretensions to the contrary.

¹Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 1.

²Thomas A. Vogler, review of Morris Eaves, *William Blake's Theory of Art*, in *Studies in Romanticism*, 24 (summer 1985), 294.