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Reply to Stewart Crehan

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IV. AMSQ, 1983. [For Blake entries see pp. 992-993 in this issue.] The more extensive reviews in this annotated bibliography are cited separately in part IV, where the volume is referred to in abbreviated form as "ECCB" (1981).¹⁰

10. Brown, David Blayney. "The Romantic Tradition: William Blake to Robin Tanner." *The Press in England, 1790-1930: A Private Collection*. Ed. Craig Bartley 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. Laura Rabe. 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. Laura Rabe. 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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When a book review of some 3000 words occasions an angry author's response of approximately equal length — a response that accuses the reviewer of, among other things, "First World arrogance" and "twist[ing] revolutionary thought into its opposite," and strongly implies that the reviewer should be numbered among the "reactionary academicians (whom Blake, we know, detested)" — it is tempting to spend another 3000 words to engage the author on each point raised and to defend or amend one's original assessment of the book. In a sense, Stewart Crehan makes such a project unnecessary. The tone of his response, in which he once again does all he can to alienate those who would hope to engage him in productive dialogue regarding Blake's historical, social, and intellectual contexts, suggests that his repeated imputations of misreading and misunderstanding may have a basis. But that basis is not a liberal ideology and a "liberal text" by which "the Marxist text can only be ignored or misread," but "the Marxist text" itself, at least if his text be taken to be what he intends by the appellation "Marxist."

The result of undertaking a dialectical analysis that divides the world into opposing camps of "liberal" and "Marxist," "reactionary" and "revolutionary," and valorizing the latter at the expense of the former is that one tends to lose sight of the possibility that the very heuristic by which he identifies other ideologies may, itself, be an ideology. Just as it is not possible simultaneously to use language and to be "outside" of it, it is not possible to discuss ideologies and be outside of them, especially since language is predisposed because prestructured to create ideologies in the very act of discussing them.

Even Marxist critics as astute as Fredric Jameson, who have done much to gain a secure and respected place for Marxist approaches to literary studies, have been held to account on precisely this point. In an important discussion of *The Political Unconscious* (1981), James H. Kavanaugh, writing in "The Jameson-Effect" (*New Orleans Review*, 11 [spring 1984]), identifies Jameson's notion of "untranscendable horizons" as his means of deemphasizing the ideological status of his own discourse and suggests that a proper Marxist critical praxis engages the problem of ideology by the sort of critical intertextuality adumbrated by the visionary conversation that occurs at the end of Blake's *Jerusalem*. In Kavanaugh's closing words, "Jameson's properly ideological discourse must be completed by 'other' Marxist theory that recognizes the very limited validity of look-

ing for 'untranscendable horizons' on the battlefield of theory."

Yet Crehan seems unaware of the problem. His Marxism, which is calculated to suppress conversation rather than to encourage it, is a monolithic science the sole purpose of which is to identify and establish "the primacy of social laws over artistic ones," and in doing so to correct the "too many books on Blake that analyse the art, poetry, and ideas (especially the ideas) and forget the social process" (p. 13). In Crehan's universe of intellect and labor, analysis of the sort he decries is as parasitic as capital itself, living off the labor of its artist-subject while fetishizing the commoditized result of that labor. "In epitomising the *meaning* of a work, however, bourgeois criticism frequently resorts to subjective impressions and perennial, supra-historical thoughts and feelings" (p. 4).

Even if one concedes the justice of this analysis, it does not follow that epitomizing the social and historical *context* of a work offers an antidote to the sort of "subjective impressions" of which Crehan is leery. Indeed, in characterizing his study as "one contribution to *the* Marxist approach to literature and art" and specifying as his salient concern "*the* social and historical context within which an artist such as Blake emerges" (pp. 12, 13; emphasis added), Crehan evokes a consensus which does not in fact exist. There is no unitary "Marxist approach," any more than there is a unitary "social and historical context." Yet Crehan takes as axiomatic the existence of both, and he does so for the purpose of establishing that interim bureaucracy of the critical proletariat that will lead to the ascendancy of Marxist literary studies rather than creating an exemplary study of the kind. Under the terms of this interim bureaucracy, analysis is a form of private property that is absolutely forbidden. Crehan himself "doubt[s] if it is possible to gain access to what Blake 'was actually saying' at all, despite pretensions to the contrary."

Crehan may well be right. It is true, as he argues, that "[T]he idea that a unique style can be developed rests on the bourgeois-Romantic belief in the individual as creative centre of his own work" (p. 183). And it is true that this belief is central to the Romantic ideology that Jerome J. McGann has set about interrogating so well. But arguing that "even the most individualistic artist is produced by the manifold social and historical contradictions of which he is a part" (p. 184) rests on an equally dubious belief underwritten by an equally subtle and powerful ideology. Self-determination and other-determination are limits or boundaries, not modes. Thus Crehan's discussion of Blake's "visual ideology" is at once overdetermined and underdetermined. His context provided him with certain technological and socio-economic options for producing art, but it produced

neither Blake nor his art wholesale. If the context had done so, there would be little to choose between the engravings of William Sharp, whom Crehan discusses, and those of Blake. And there is something to choose between them.

In the final analysis, I neither credit the position of Anne K. Mellor that Crehan attacks, namely, "that Blake 'formed a distinctly personal style,'" nor do I credit his position that it was a style entirely determined by an external context. In arguing over whether "things happen" in the life-world because of innate, personal or external, social causes, Crehan falls prey to what is perhaps humanity's oldest and least productive hermeneutical conundrum. "Things happen" in the life-world as the result of both sorts of cause. Blake's visual art is in part of his time, but it is also heavily influenced by a religious commitment closely tied to his readings in gnosticism, especially those pertaining to the supplantation of the true story of the first creation by a false one. This supplantation is picked up by Warburton in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1738-41), in his discussion of the manner in which the place of the original, "hieroglyphic" account of the creation (Genesis 2:4b-2:25) was usurped by that of a later Mosaic hymn (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). Thus while Blake may have used certain collectively recognizable artistic conventions and techniques of his time, he did so to the end of recovering the authentic hebraic vision that he identified with a usurped and betrayed gnosticism, epitomized by a "hieroglyphic" style successively debased by the civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Speaking of context, this is a position that Blake probably assumed no later than the period in which he, as an apprentice to Basire, executed several of the engravings for Jacob Bryant's *A New System of Ancient Mythology* (1774-76), which argues that mythologies such as the Egyptian and the Greek are corrupted accounts of originals found in the Old Testament.

There simply is no place in Crehan's analysis of contexts for innate, personal causes such as religious commitment. He has occasion, for example, to refer to "Blake's ideological revolt" being "not merely a response to contemporary realities; it can also be seen as the continuation of hitherto submerged traditions" such as those of "the antinomians, Ranters, and other radicals of the seventeenth century" (pp. 7-8). But by assuming that these traditions offered Blake the option of discarding one preexistent ideology and taking up another, Crehan completely fails to understand that Blake may have actually harbored strong, *personal* religious beliefs, and that these beliefs may have been the result

not of passive acceptance, but of the sort of vigorous conversation that begins in the Memorable Fancies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and ends in *Jerusalem*. While I myself harbor no strong religious commitment (raised in Reformed Judaism, I remain a secular Jew), I would think twice before dismissing as ideological the religious agenda that informs both Blake's verbal art and his visual.

It strikes me that this rejoinder has grown oblique, and I apologize for that. Moreover, I apologize to Stewart Crehan for having, in a few instances, misread the intent or the substance of his comments. Whether it is the fault of the author or the reviewer, it was not always clear to me that Crehan's intent was "equipping us with a historically objective account of Romantic ideology," especially since the ideology was alternately discovered underwriting the Romantics themselves and their later critics, nor was the ideology underwriting the critics the same as the one underwriting the Romantics, as it is for McGann. It is finally difficult to know precisely what Crehan defines as ideology, except that anything so defined lies on the other side of the dialectical divide from that on which Crehan situates himself. This is not to say that good ideological analysis is impossible. McGann's is exemplary on a theoretical plane, while that of Maureen McNeil on the Lunar Society of Birmingham is exemplary on the practical.

One reason for the increasing obliqueness of this rejoinder and the occasional obtuseness of the review is that *Blake in Context* does not invite engagement. It is at once grandiose in its debunking of a good part of Blake studies and evasive in failing to provide well-butressed alternatives, at once sweeping in its sociohistorical generalizations and question-begging in its attempt to situate Blake meaningfully in the contexts those generalizations evoke. In its taunting of bourgeois critics and spineless intellectuals for the benefit of an assumed intellectual proletariat, the book alienates precisely those with whom Crehan must close. But he wishes to keep his distance, apparently, and his tactic of dialectical analysis, replete with the bandying about of ideologies and ideological labels of all sorts is finally nothing other than a form of what in psychology is known as projection and denial. If there is a classic case of the syndrome in Blake, it is not Los, who becomes what he beholds, but Urizen, who compels others to worship a horizoned view of reality that he at once creates and denies responsibility for creating. If Crehan's is exemplary of "the Marxist approach to literature and art," there is little to choose between its "untranscendable horizons" and the bounding ones of the Urizenic landscape.