

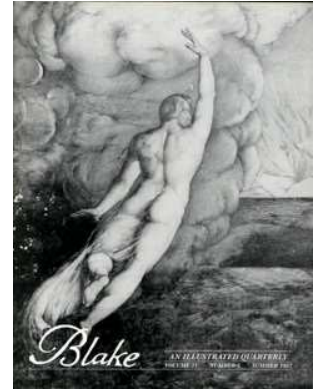
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision of William Blake*

Edward Larrissy

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 21, Issue 1, Summer 1987, pp. 41-42



mett's dialogue got me over the rocky spots" (221). Jane's erotic conflict coincides with an intellectual conflict. On the horns of her dilemma are two originary texts, Blake and *Black Mask*, and the comic conflict is resolved in terms of that textual conflict: "Saturday, 8:49-9:34 A.M.: Attempt to read *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Saturday, 9:35-10:39 A.M.: Sneak copy of Horace McCoy's *No Pockets in a Shroud* out of suitcase" (170).

Hank speaks "Blake-speak" (100), Jane speaks hardboiled. A comedy written in the most tolerant spirit would find some way of reconciling them, and in her most accommodating moments Jane can sling some Blake herself:

"Listen, Jane." He sounded serious. "Are you sure you still want to go [to Golgonooza] tomorrow?"

"The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow; nor the lion, the horse, how he shall take his prey.' Winny's visit convinced me." Boy did it.

"It did?" Golden Boy seemed startled.

"The thankful receiver bears a plentiful harvest.' Right? So now I have a better idea about what Golgonooza's all about." . . . I felt guilty and horny. "Expect poison from the standing water," old Willy Boy warned. Better to act. I did. On Gallagher. Most of the night. (131-32)

But Blake and hardboiled aren't to be reconciled:

"Hank, we can't stay here."

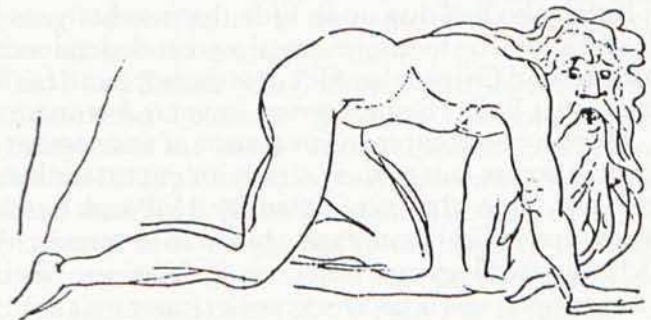
"Listen to the fool's reproach.'"

"Fuck you." (165)

In a world where women are frails and skirts, nobody's likely to get away with calling them daughters of Albion. The opposition is kept from being quite absolute by the double capability of photography for documentation and art, which allows it, and Jane, to occupy some middle ground of art-in-life. Nonetheless, the P.I., Palladino, who has no truck with fancypants art photogs but a real need for some real photography, turns out to be the only one with enough insight to see through the intellectual pretenses of Jane's Blake-nut boyfriend. I'll honor the conventions of mystery reviewing enough to keep quiet about the ending, but clearly the answer to Jane's problems must come from the pages of the hardboiled text. Sure enough, at a climactic feast in the comic tradition . . . presided over by Palladino's earthy wife Gina . . . with a mystery guest at the dinner table in the tradition of golden-age detection. . . .

Who might read *The Dick and Jane*? Some reviewers have said they found it engaging, and no serious historian of the wisecrack can afford to miss it. What modest strength *The Dick and Jane* can claim is in the playful rhythms and diction that give the heroine a certain winning charm. Even that pleasure subsides once you've adjusted to the idea of hardboiled yammer gushing out of the frail's softboiled gash. The satire on the Blakeans of Golgonooza, which would be pretty deadly for anyone coming in cold, may be readable for students of the uses

of Blake in modern culture. If they swear they won't blame me when they find out that *The Dick and Jane* has no puzzle, local color, violence, or titillation worth the name, I would recommend it to Blake scholars and mystery buffs looking for something to get them through a long layover in the People Express terminal at Newark, or through a summer vacation at a certain spiritual community in America's heartland. But no guarantees.



Michael Ferber. *The Social Vision of William Blake*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. xvi + 254 pp. \$29.50.

Reviewed by Edward Larrissy

Jung's law of synchronicity would seem at first glance to have been startlingly confirmed by the appearance within the space of one year (1985) of three books which give importance to Blake's ideological position and its historical determinants. And all three agree about the crucial nature of Blake's radical Protestant inheritance. They are Terence Hoagwood's *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind*; my own *William Blake* in Terry Eagleton's Rereading Literature series; and the book under review. There are various precursors of this approach: A. L. Morton, David Erdman, E. P. Thompson, G. R. Sabri-Tabrizi, Morton Paley, David Punter. But none so far that fastens on the complexity of Blake's ideological position and its textual expressions in the thorough way that is now proposed (whatever the practice) especially in this book and my own.

It is interesting to record a modicum of agreement between Ferber and myself. On antinomianism, for instance. We agree that, although Blake is a complex amalgam, the antinomian strain is the dominant and organizing one, and that once this is understood one has found a vital key to Blake's use of other traditions. Ferber

gives Gerrard Winstanley as an example of the kind of seventeenth-century figure who can be seen as an ancestor of Blake. But in a book of this size it might have been well to quote more fully from other writers, say the Ranter Abiezer Coppe (who receives one mention) even at the risk of seeming to repeat material used by A. L. Morton. My own approach has been to grub around looking for evidence of a line of descent from the seventeenth-century radical Christians to the time of Blake. It is not especially easy to discover, but I was sorry to find that Ferber also had dug up so little that was both concrete and new. The footnotes reveal a great dependence on Morton and Christopher Hill. It is the hope and faith of many that E. P. Thompson may be more fortunate.

There is one point in his treatment of antinomianism where Ferber fails to show clearly an important link with Blake. It is the fact, noted by Hill and Keith Thomas, that radical Protestants tended to be interested in alchemy, astrology and other occult doctrines. Once one has grasped this it becomes much clearer that there is no need to choose between two Blakes, one radical, the other arcane: there is one tradition and one Blake. Ferber adduces the interesting case of John Everard, the Hermetist and translator of *The Divine Pymander of Hermes Trismegistus*. He was, as Ferber notes, "a radical Protestant troublemaker, frequently in jail for heresy . . . who preached to the lowest classes that God was immanent in man and nature" (p. 93). Ferber has a few vague words to say about this in his chapter on "Nature and the Female," but the whole phenomenon of Protestant occultism surely merited more extended discussion in his section on antinomianism.

Seen in this perspective, the Behmenists look not so much like a Teutonic excrescence amid the radical Christians, rather a happy transplant into congenial soil. Ferber has some useful things to say about how the "backwardness" of Germany meant that the tradition of artisanal piety out of which Boehme came was still alive in the 1790s, so that Behmenism lived on quite strongly and was able to exert a significant influence on the German Romantics. Hence, perhaps, some of the similarities between them and Blake. I should add that Fuseli might have transmitted the revived excitement about Boehme; but as Ferber well says, Blake also belonged to a tradition of artisanal piety, one which in England had been undermined by rationalism and was now threatened by the Industrial Revolution (pp. 33-34).

Ferber and I also agree that Blake's "enthusiastic" inheritance makes his relationship with the mainstream tradition of Dissent—so influenced by Locke—a complex and ambivalent one. He is particularly good on the complexity, showing that both innatism and empiricism can point either way politically (p. 23). Ambivalence, however, is not Ferber's strong point, wherever he finds it; while I should have to confess that I perhaps use the

word too often. What is so interesting, though, is still the modicum of agreement. It seems that when one considers Blake's ideological position one is forced to consider the question of "the extent to which Blake became a prisoner of his own system or saw his way clear of it, and the contamination of his system by the one he was fighting" (p. 43). "Contamination" crops up again (pp. 100, 113), but is not given the full treatment it deserves, and deserves precisely in this context most of all. A less snooty attitude towards deconstruction (p. 100) might have helped. It might also have helped towards a fuller consideration of textual forms rather than a concentration on themes.

But this is an engaging, clear and very useful book. It is also a full one: the components of Blake's social vision are treated with the thoroughness they deserve. They are, nevertheless, treated somewhat episodically. A good example is to be found in the very useful chapter on "Blake's Ideology." Ferber is very firm in his introduction about the desirability of retaining a strict Marxist meaning for the word ideology: "Language may breed illusions, but it is better not to call these illusions ideological unless we find a different term for the particular illusions that arise from and ratify the unequal divisions of society" (p. 12). But in the chapter on Blake's ideology, central aspects (according to the strict definition) such as "Artisanal Dissent" are treated on all fours with what should surely be derivatives: "Closure," or even "Blake's Difficulty." As the book progresses it becomes even more sporadic in character.

Nevertheless, this book, by what it succeeds in doing, has filled a real gap. It will be indispensable. And how often can one say that?

