

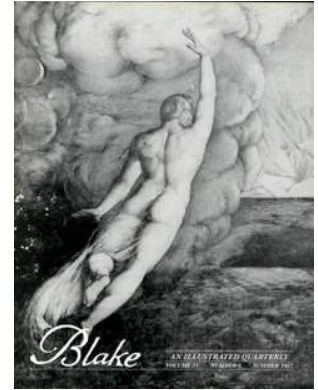
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R E V I E W

Joanne Witke, William Blake's Epic: Imagination
Unbound

Catherine McClenahan

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ties and slipperiness of allegory—its function as an unveiling mode but also as a mode of mystification, usurpation, and idolatry—to see how these two functional poles may infect one another; but Spenser is “equally aware that he is not quite in a position to offer any other myth or god-term that might dissolve these dilemmas” (69). Thus as allegorist and complex fabulist, he “plays the maddening game” of exposing the liabilities of allegory even as he tries to “reauthenticate it as a viable road to vision” (69). Blake, on the other hand, is shrewdly aware of the duplicities and powerful dangers of the mode but clearly does see himself in a position to offer another myth or “god-term” that does resolve the dilemmas. And, as I have argued, at the core of that “position” is his extraordinary and largely successful attempt to reauthenticate allegory—addressed, of course, to the “intellectual powers”—not merely as a viable road to vision but as vision itself.

I hope it is clear by now that I admire this book; but at the same time, while I wish it were there for me to draw on for my own, I do not think that I would have changed mine much had I read Gross first. For, if through Blake's eyes I came to see *The Faerie Queene* as he did, in substantial and even remarkable ways Gross does too. Even if Blake didn't, indeed couldn't and wouldn't if he could, think in Gross's terms, one might still imagine a scholarly Blake scribbling assorted huzzahs in the margins of his copy of *Spenserian Poetics*. At its core it is a book that underwrites Blake's sense of Spenser's redeemability (I hope not merely *my* sense of Blake's sense of Spenser's redeemability). It is meet, right, and good, then, that of his three specific references to Blake, one of which I quoted earlier, Gross closes with a quotation from the coda to the apocalypse of *The Four Zoas*: “The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns”—and then comments:

Spenser, for whatever reasons, neither attempted nor could he master so extreme a rhetoric. The apocalyptic present tense belongs only to his giants and enchanter. The authoritative rule of order over change is asserted only for a space [in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*], and Book VII closes, though less desperately than Book VI, by leaving the temporal world to its shifting illusions and images, and turning to a projected sight [“that Sabaoth's sight”] that, for all the poem knows, is “visionless entire.” (252)



WILLIAM BLAKE'S EPIC: Imagination Unbound



Joanne Witke

Joanne Witke, *William Blake's Epic: Imagination Unbound*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. ii+231 pp. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Catherine McClenahan

Joanne Witke, who has previously published articles on Blake's connection to Bishop Berkeley and on the synoptic Gospels as a structural model for *Jerusalem*,¹ combines these approaches in her book-length reading of this poem as Blake's creation of a “System” designed to oppose that of Joshua Reynolds. Since Witke sees this system as solving a philosophical problem whose “formal categories are literary,” her aim is to demonstrate the poem's “philosophical nucleus,” its operation as an epic, and Blake's aesthetic principles (prefatory note). She combines philosophical and aesthetic issues to form three arguments: first, that Reynolds' aesthetics are

founded on the natural philosophy of Bacon, Newton, and, especially though tacitly, Locke; second, that "whether or not Blake used Berkeley as a quarry," *Jerusalem's* system "discloses striking similarities to Berkeley's critique of natural philosophy, to the principles of his system, and to his defense of it" (217); third, that these philosophical themes structure a narrative in *Jerusalem* (based on copy D). Hence, in Witke's summary:

Los's labors consist largely of exposing false principles of art based on natural philosophy and their consequences for the nation; denouncing the fallacy of confusing morality with abstract science; liberating human creativity from material forces; unravelling nets of abstract reasonings; opening up the narrowed senses; and, not least, bringing to light the true principles based on the sensuous imagination. (220)

Parts 1 and 2 of the book introduce the philosophical and aesthetic arguments. The prologue covers Blake's philosophical relationships to Berkeley and Plato; "Blake as Artist" examines the influence of Plato and Locke on Reynolds, paralleling Blake's conflict with Reynolds to Berkeley's with Locke. Parts 3 through 5 divide the commentary on *Jerusalem's* first chapter into analyses of Albion's condition, its causes, and Los's efforts to improve it.

Part 3, "Attacks upon *Jerusalem*," adds the argument that *Jerusalem* is a non-classical epic framed by the four-part Gospel structure: a choice that lends the poem an "increased authenticity, sublimity and pathos but also apocalyptic significance," befitting its epic aim to rescue England from a state of ruin "most contributed to" by natural religion and morality (35, 37). Specific explication covers the opening address, the narrator's comments on Lockean principles in plates 5 and 10, and Albion's rejection of *Jerusalem* for Vala in plates 18–25. Part 4, "The Satanic Triumvirate," interrupts sequential explication in order to sketch the horrors of Bacon, Newton and Locke as Coban, Hand, and Hyle. Part 5, "Defenders of *Jerusalem*," returns to the poem's first chapter to discuss the conflict of Los and the Spectre as Blake's argument with Reynolds, as well as the nature of Golgonooza, and Los's speech in plate 17. Parts 6 through 8 ("Encounters with the Enemy," "Grim War Continues," and "Jerusalem Restored"), sequentially explicate the poem's remaining three chapters, briefly noting their links to the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John, respectively; chapter 1 is linked to Matthew. Part 9, an epilogue, recapitulates Witke's main arguments. The book includes black and white reproductions: *The Meeting of a Family in Heaven* and twenty plates from *Jerusalem*.

Witke's book addresses relevant questions. Although other scholars have investigated the influence of Berkeley or Reynolds on Blake's art, none has related them to specific works in this kind of detail, and there are few book-length studies of this important poem. The strict parameters of her approach to *Jerusalem* are a

heuristic device often employed to understand something complex. In this case, the method helps us to recognize contexts of the poem that readers may not know, and to see why Blake might have found the ideas of Reynolds and Berkeley to be especially useful focal points. The book shows how specific philosophical and aesthetic principles apply even where the poem's action appears to concern something else. Witke's explications of how Blake also uses biblical analogies to these principles can be clear and helpful, as in the treatment of Los's shaping of Reuben. The philosophical analogies to Berkeley's thought are supported with a wealth of direct quotation. These quotations, like those from Reynolds, Bacon, Newton, and Locke, also provide instances of terms we recognize as significant in Blake (though without comment on possible variants in meaning): e.g., "particulars" (and "particularities," "minute particulars"), "energy," "contraction and expansion," "unfolding," "emanation" and "spectre."

At the same time, however, Blake's actual practice in verbal and visual art tries to make us aware of both the powerful allure and the dangers of such a heuristic. At times Witke's concentration on aesthetics leads only to more confusion about why the text says what it does; at others it may seem to work, but in fact significantly distorts a poem whose particulars resist condensation into one system. Thus while Witke examines legitimate contexts for the poem, the book has puzzling and even troubling aspects.

For one thing, this book does less than one might expect to situate itself within existing scholarship on Blake's attitude toward Reynolds or the philosophers in the footnotes or the opening section; there is no bibliography. In other cases previous work is dismissed in a casual or misleading manner.² Such exclusionary tendencies reflect a more fundamental conceptual problem: *William Blake's Epic* exemplifies a reductive and old-fashioned version of intellectual history, which casts Bacon, Newton, and Locke (and therefore Reynolds) as pure mechanists, the Bad Guys, utterly opposed to the creative Good Guys. Witke acknowledges that Blake sometimes agreed with Reynolds (e.g., 23), but she never shows how Blake's attitude toward the philosophers could be more than simple rejection. Bacon, Newton, and Locke are regarded exclusively from Berkeley's point of view. Elsewhere Witke claims that we may consult not the poem itself but Berkeley "for a straightforward philosophical exposition" of the "essential metaphysical beliefs" (120) Blake shares with him. Similarly, Blake is not shown to disagree with Berkeley about anything. For example, one paragraph summarizes an indeterminate number of preceding ones with the claim that "In all of this, Blake agrees with Berkeley" (against Plato) and promptly cites the first part of Blake's annotation to *Siris*, p. 214: "Knowledge is not by deduction but Immediate by Perception or Sense at once" (Witke, 9). But this

very annotation registers a point of dissent. Berkeley writes:

By experiments of sense we become acquainted with the lower faculties of the soul; and from them, whether by a *gradual evolution or ascent*, we arrive at the highest. These become subjects for fancy to work upon. *Reason considers and judges of the imaginations*. And these acts become new objects to the understanding. (emphasis added)

Thus Blake appears to disagree with Berkeley as well as Plato. He denies knowledge as a sequential process and as deduction, reiterating in the following sentence, which Witke does not include: "Christ addresses himself to the Man not to his Reason."³

This kind of reduction and opposition characterizes the book in other ways as well. Witke carefully acknowledges that her study does not say "everything that needs to be said" about *Jerusalem*. But later statements specifically *exclude* the possibility of other contexts or meanings for given speeches and actions—notably when gender and sexuality are involved. In discussing, for example, the "seemingly absurd" metaphors of "Uncircumcision" and "Chastity," which "refer to corporeal substance and abstract ideas" as applied to Reynolds, Witke asserts that "these two doctrines—generating bodies and purity of conception—account for the remarkable persistence of sexual imagery in *Jerusalem*" (emphasis added). She makes this claim, unnecessarily extreme even given the terms of her argument, in trying to highlight "Reynolds' ideal of 'unadulterated' and simple forms, which he consolidates in the phrase 'simple chaste nature'" (81). But Reynolds is not just highlighted here; he becomes the necessary and sufficient cause for everything in the poem. Similarly, on plate 88, "the issue between Los and Enitharmon concerns power of the artist, not power of the sexes" (196).

In fact, many of the explications involving *Jerusalem's* females raise more questions than they answer, but here the problem may also have another source. In theory, Witke's approach should allow for two kinds of conflict which the poem invites us to see: in Witke's terms, the externalized conflict between "the inspired artist" and critics of Reynolds' persuasion, and the internal conflict of the artist whose imagination has been influenced by an aesthetics based on natural philosophy and morality. The mere conflation or intermixing of these two kinds of conflict, even within a single sentence, frequently produces confusing accounts of the nature and actions of the Spectre and of the emanations or daughters in the poem. For example, glossing the line, "the Feminine / Emanations Create Space. the Masculine Create Time, & plant / The Seeds of beauty in the Space" (*J* 85:7–9), is the following account of the act of creation (which is the same as perception, according to the argument elsewhere):

The impulse to create emanates from within the artist; the divine power of imagination perceives tangible objects in visionary form, presenting to the poet/artist ideas which he shapes according to his genius and artistic purpose into a work of art. The daughters here function as muses, providing Los with sensuous material for embodying eternity in spacetime. . . . (193)

The unified character of perception/creation, as well as the unity of imagination and reality that Witke everywhere argues for on Berkeleyan grounds, suddenly splits with an imagination that "presents" ideas to the artist and with the daughters or emanations read as separate "muses" who "provide" Los with material in the second sentence. (Here Los apparently refers only to the artist, not to imagination: the scenario is only external conflict.)

One extended example might better explain this kind of confusion and reductiveness in relation to the book's third argument, about the narrative of Los's labors to save Albion. I agree with Witke that there is a narrative in the poem (though not that synchronic arguments are "wrong"), but I have deep reservations about the interpretation of Los that she provides in her account. Let me take the turning-point of this narrative. Like Witke, I would locate it specifically at the beginning of plate 92, but also more broadly as the section between 86:50 and 93:27—Los's last confrontations with Enitharmon and the Spectre.

Like most readers, Witke associates the Spectre who is "the author" of Los's and Enitharmon's "divisions & shrinkings" (88:35) with "abstract reasoning." This form of reason, she adds, "has come between the artist's inspirations and his works" (which suggests a conflict within the artist's imagination), "labeling them immoral, licentious, unscientific" (which suggests external judgments on the artist's work; 197). Likewise the divided Enitharmon is "the artist's life-giving substance, his faculty of creativity" (194); and she then is further described as "a disciple of Vala," affected by natural philosophy, and thus as having "joined Albion's daughters" (197, 195). Now both characterizations suggest internal division (though the second is ambiguous); the oddity, however, is that Los remains utterly unfazed by this conflict.

Los now represents only the artist in an external conflict, who holds to "spiritual perception" and so he merely "refuses to submit," "becomes more assertive," and finally "smites the Spectre until he overcomes him" (194–203, *passim*). In this reading, the Spectre whose senses and "every Ratio of his reason" are altered by these blows also becomes an unambiguously external figure or system. Given such attacks on the false system or its representative, it is creditable that "this action signals a visible turning-point in the war" (203). For Witke, the specific signal is Los's vision of "the Briton Saxon Roman Norman amalgamating / . . . into One Nation the En-

glish" (92:1-2; only the last five words are quoted). By sticking to a scenario of divinely inspired artist at war with a system of natural philosophy, morality, and art, Witke can read the situation here as purely positive, "foretoking . . . resurrection, the end of warfare and a state of concord" (203) in England. As a result, Los needs only one last "strong reproof of Reynolds' system" (in 93:18-26) in order for Albion/England to wake and espouse the poet's system (204).

This narrative account raises many questions. For example, if "amalgamating / . . . into One Nation the English" is unequivocally good, what should we make of Los's statement that "this *sinful* Nation Created in our Furnaces & Looms is Albion" (92:6; emphasis added)? Could Los be acknowledging a "sin" (aesthetic or philosophical) which at this point he also knows how to "forgive"? Is "nation" an unquestionably positive term in the poem? Why have earlier "reproofs," "smitings" of the Spectre, or articulations of a counter-system not succeeded in waking Albion before? How has an artist divided "from his creative faculty" continued to operate without making a false step anywhere? Has the Los who spends a great deal of time uttering loud threats or smiting a Spectre really conquered "my Pride & Self-righteousness" (J 8:30) or won "the war" by anything other than successful bullying?

As far as I can tell, the answers to all but the first question about the narrative argument outlined above depend on one more contradictory aspect of this book and on Witke's fundamental argument about "Vision."

First, Witke notes that "the existence and nature of God are related issues" in an artistic system predicated on "a vital creative eternal spirit"; often, and quite rightly, she stresses that Berkeley's *spirit* or Blake's *imagination* is "a substance we share with the Creator, making us one with him" (152, 119). But the relative inattention to internal conflict evident in Witke's reading works in conjunction with a de-emphasis of God as Imagination. Witke's phrasing often suggests a dualistic system of a transcendental divinity who acts on human beings: the combination of the frequently repeated phrase "divinely inspired" (artist, poet, Los) with references to Los as "an agent of God's intervention in the transformation of human history" (173) or to a "revelation . . . imparted by God to prophets" (14-15). The transcendental divinity implied by such phrasing would explain Los's righteous threats, his ability to avoid mistakes, and the timing of his "victory" over his "enemies," but it seems very much at odds with the radical Incarnationalism of "God. the Human Imagination" (J 5:20; not cited), and with Witke's overt argument for immanence elsewhere.

Second, if I am correctly understanding a complex argument scattered through several chapters of explication, Witke's description of Blake's adaptation of Berkeley's theory of "Vision" would help explain why words

like "nation" or Blakean constructs like Beulah are interpreted in only one, positive way—and indeed why *William Blake's Epic* produces a schematic reading of the poem. This argument is too long even to outline fully, but the key point is made in the closing summary. *Jerusalem's* "poetic argument proceeds almost exclusively by bare and naked ideas perceived by imagination" (as opposed to abstractions constructed by reason): that is, by "a visual quality" that "reflects the language of determinate objects and *directs* the variable meanings of words" (221, emphasis added). This recalls the earlier argument that Blake agreed with Berkeley's idea that "the universal language is . . . not linguistic but visionary: 'objects of Vision constitute the Universal Language of Nature'" (Witke, 123, citing Berkeley's *Theory of Vision*, 147). Therefore, "for both men visual forms are a metaphysical preference" over verbal language and so, for Blake, illustration "avoids indefiniteness" (124). In short, Witke's reliance on Berkeley leads her to the highly debatable positions that verbal language cannot be both multivalent and particularized, and that the illustrations are intended to be univalent.

In the example of plate 92, then, not only does Witke's single positive reading of "nation" fit the context of "Blake's system vs. Reynolds' system," but such a reading also fits a Berkeleian, and thus supposedly Blakean, concept of *particular forms*. This assumption would then seem to "direct" Witke's own repeated description of Blake's aim in this epic: e.g., "to ensure the nation's greatness and lasting fame" (219-20), presuming a nationalistic bias which some readers will certainly question, and which, in any case, sounds remarkably like the political agenda that informs Reynolds' aesthetic arguments.⁵ In fact, a whole discourse of division and opposition that Witke clearly associates with natural philosophy and morality is unselfconsciously adopted in her constant reliance on words like "nation," "enemies," "defenders," and "war" to characterize the poem's narrative, just as the approach takes on a kind of "mechanistic" rigidity associated with Reynolds and the "Satanic Triumvirate."

Such tendencies are only reinforced by omitting to define a Gospel-based or Christian epic and its differences from classical epic, or *Jerusalem's* difference from the Miltonic form of Christian epic. As a result, the question of how even Christian epic could tend to legitimize concepts of exclusion and enmity—concepts which Witke describes Blake's system as opposing—is not overtly considered, though relevant to arguments about his epic aims. For Blake's "system" does more than "forgive" vanquished enemies (209); it dismantles a system of "enemies" who strive for victory or "dominion." Like Los, the poet strives to persuade himself as well as others to a new kind of seeing/creating: to a recognition that

the work of "enemies" like Bacon, Newton, and Locke, or Milton, Shakespeare, and Chaucer, always have been emanations of Jerusalem, however unconscious or distorted. If we do focus on narrative, it seems no accident that when Albion "wakes," "war" becomes a "conversation" that can begin only with a perceiver who transforms enemies into fellow incarnations of a human form divine.

William Blake's Epic, then, is not the best introduction for newcomers to the poem or to an investigation of Blake's attitudes towards Berkeley and Reynolds. But the benefits it can provide will be most obvious to alert readers who can, as Blake urged, both see and forgive what they do not approve, and honor its author for the energetic exertion of her talent.

¹"Jerusalem: A Synoptic Poem," *Comparative Literature* (summer, 1970): 265-78; and "Blake's Tree of Knowledge Grows Out of The Enlightenment," *Enlightenment Essays* 3 (1972): 71-84.

²For example, the brief comments on Northrop Frye (2, n. 5), or W. J. T. Mitchell (221, n. 2).

³My Blake citations are from David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), 664. Leopold Damrosch, Jr., also argues for Blake's divergence from Berkeley in this annotation. See *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 16, 141.

⁴Readers can locate the details of this argument by referring to "Bare and naked forms," "Particulars," and "Vision" in the index.

⁵A quotation from Reynolds' first discourse, that it is "necessary to the security of society, that the mind should be elevated to the idea of general beauty . . ." (38), implies the political dimension of Reynolds' aesthetics that becomes even more pronounced after the French Revolution. (For this connection, I am indebted to John Barrell's lecture on "Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting" at the 1986 MWASECS Conferences at Northwestern University.) However, Witke's prefatory note warns that it is not her aim to consider political issues, and the reliance on Berkeley restricts England's "crisis" to its metaphysical and aesthetic aspects only.

Bryan Aubrey. *Watchmen of Eternity: Blake's Debt to Jacob Boehme*. Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1986. xiii+193 pp. \$27.00 cloth/\$13.25 paper.

Reviewed by George Mills Harper

Edition.¹ In his own collected writings Blake referred to Boehme by name only twice (in 1793 and 1800), but many critics have assumed that his influence was considerable if not great. How, we ask ourselves, can we argue with Blake's blunt statement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen, produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborgs, and from those of Dante or Shakespear an infinite number."² To play the devil's advocate, however, I will call attention to still "another plain fact": Blake places Boehme on the same plane as Paracelsus, far above the level of Swedenborg but far below the level of Dante and Shakespeare. Moreover, although little can be proved precisely by Blake's enthusiastic distinctions, the skeptical among us remind ourselves that he annotated three of Swedenborg's books, one with considerable care, whereas he probably annotated none of Boehme's. If in fact Blake owned the Law edition, as Bentley and Nurmi cautiously suggest, the copy has not survived. Perhaps, however, the book was too dear for the penniless Blake.³

But all this is beside the point in one sense: he was excited over Boehme as early as 1793 and still excited, according to Henry Crabb Robinson, as late as 10 December 1825: "Jacob Boehme was spoken of as a divinely inspired man. Blake praised, too, the figures in Law's translation as being very beautiful. Michael Angelo could not have done better."⁴ That too may be beside the point: the question raised by Aubrey is how strong, pervasive, and continuing Boehme's influence on Blake was. For the opinions of others we may begin—as Aubrey does—with William Butler Yeats, who was himself influenced by Boehme and who declared that *The Book of Urizen* "is page by page a transformation, according to Blake's peculiar illumination, of the doctrines set forth in the opening chapters of the 'Mysterium Magnum' of Jacob Boehme." Even so, it should be pointed out that Yeats is trying to "convict commentators" like Garnett, Gilchrist, and Rossetti, who "show [no] evidence of having ever given so much as a day's study to any part of Blake's mystical writing."⁵ Aubrey obviously found a powerful ally in Yeats. However, one of Aubrey's assumptions illustrates the mistakes sometimes induced by over-enthusiastic source studies. Writing about the conflict of opposites leading to the vision of joy in Boehme's system, Aubrey confidently declares that "Yeats captured this vision in his play *The Unicorn from the Stars*, in which the dreamer Martin Hearne (who is based on Boehme), discovers that the life of paradise is like 'a battle where the sword made a sound that was like laughter'" (39). Now the "plain fact" is that *The Unicorn* was inspired by Nietzsche, who was—at one degree removed in the person of Zarathustra—the typical example for Martin Hearne. Moreover, the source of the vision of the

All serious students of Blake know that he read Boehme and approved in general what he found in the famous collection of Boehme's *Works* known as the William Law