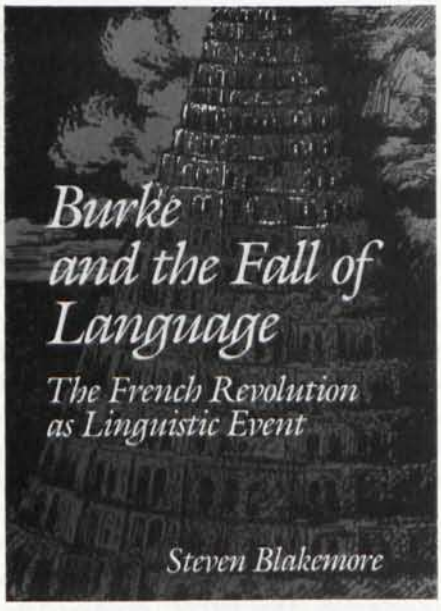
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jerome J. McGann, Towards a Literature of Knowledge

Michael Fischer

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 24, Issue 3, Winter 1990/1991, pp. 103-106



tive political purposes. For example, Burke argues for a constitution that exists "time out of mind" (8) in an unwritten past preserving traditional meanings whereas Paine insists that a constitution's legitimacy comes from writing, as evidenced by the American colonists' document. Legitimacy of governmental authority is also "proven" by both sides through an argument from origins. Burke's authority rests in an "ancient" origin that is "unknowable and hence fruitless to trace" (21). Blakemore points out that Paine strategically emphasizes a Biblical myth of origins that predates Burke's abstract "ancient" sources. This answer to Burke is very similar to the way in which Blake's *French Revolution* emphasizes France's "ancient" liberties (as Michael Ferber has noted, the word carries a largely Burkean resonance throughout the poem). Finally, Blakemore contrasts how the language of patriarchy is used by both sides. Burke had used this argument in defense of the American revolution, but Blakemore notes this change of heart: "Whereas Burke envisions the American Revolution as the oppressive father denying the American child his constitutional rights, he envisions the French Revolution as a revolt of the child against his natural parents" (38).

Although the historical topics of the first half are rewarding, the last half of the book is even more so as Blakemore delves into the connection between language and ideology by examining Burke's belief that revolutionary criticism of government, religion, and, above all, language means a fall from innocence; a "stripping of linguistic veils" (70) actually creates chaos. Thus the revolution as a radical linguistic event was one that upset the entire worldview. Blakemore discusses specific historical linguistic arguments over classical versus vernacular language, the establishment of a new "national" language, and the renaming of the French calendar and streets. In fact, the revolutionaries wanted a demystification of language that would change the title French King to "king of the French," so that common men would not be, as Paine said, "immured in the Bastille of a word." The final chapter, which is somewhat loosely joined to the rest of the book (perhaps due to its being printed earlier in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*) explores Burke's nostalgia for the aristocracy in terms of language and his fear that revolution would create a second Babel or worse.

Throughout the book, Blakemore keeps his eye on Burke's "majestic presence," and this not so subtle reverence for Burke may annoy some readers, but the well-written final chapter successfully argues for Burke's "modern" sensitivity to language. Blakemore's study, aside from its value as a compendium of important revolutionary arguments of Burke and Paine, employs a rewarding method of interpreting discourse as a dialectic in sociopolitical reality, a strategy especially fruitful in Blake studies, as Blake directly and indirectly reinterprets Locke, Newton, and Burke. Blakemore's study intends uppermost to remind us how much language alters our perception of reality and, indeed, that any interpretation of history or literature is "bounded by the very language that expresses it" (105).

Jerome J. McGann. *Towards a Literature of Knowledge.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. xii + 138 pp. $24.95.

Reviewed by Michael Fischer

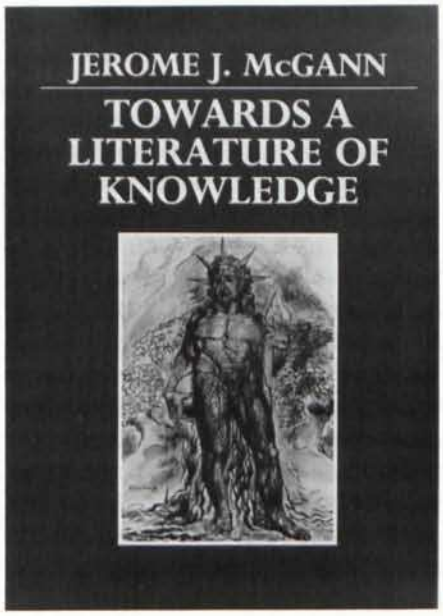
Towards a Literature of Knowledge is the final installment in a wide-ranging series of books on literature, history, and ideology. Elsewhere I have discussed the first four books in this series: *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983), *The Beauty of Inflections* (1985), and *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (1988).[1] Here I want to consider why such a tentatively entitled book concludes this series—why, in other words, at the climax of his project McGann sees himself still moving towards a literature of knowledge instead of arriving at it.

By "a literature of knowledge," McGann means a literature that "deals in matters of truth and error" and "promotes moral and political values" (vii). For him this is all literature. "The secret of the imagination" is "that it makes statements, that it communicates, that its architectonics have designs upon us" (vii). In the brief theoretical introduction that opens the book, McGann suggests that the intellectual and political force of literature has remained a secret (rather than public knowledge) because formalist aesthetic theory has emphasized the purity of the arts, their rising above political protest, sales pitches, sermons, and other discourse with designs upon us. McGann sees literary works as speech acts interested in accomplishing a wide range of politically charged tasks, from achieving social change to identifying what ought to count as knowledge. Unlike other equally interested forms of commun-

ication, however, literary works have consequences that always exceed the intent of the writer. Although literary works are thus more intentional (or less pure) than the formalist concedes, they are also more open-ended and self-subverting than the propagandist would like.

This view of literature will be familiar to readers of McGann's other work. I remain bothered by McGann's willingness to speak of "all poetry" (7) everywhere and always. McGann has a penchant for generalizing about "art's performative function" (4) and for laying down ironclad, ahistorical laws like "'The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' This is the apophthegm under which poetry is compelled to operate" (8).[2] The passive voice in this statement typically avoids specifying who or what obligates poetry to operate this way. Critics of course have compelled poetry to do all kinds of things, among them imitate men in action, promote moral truths, reinforce the Bible, and tap into the collective unconscious. I think politically-minded academic critics like McGann compel poetry to operate their way in order to justify it as an especially self-critical form of discourse. McGann evades saying this perhaps because such a statement makes his critical approach seem only the preference of a particular group of critics who happen to value self-criticism and conflict. Instead of arguing for his way of looking at poetry, McGann conceals it in apparently disinterested definitions. Critics don't falsify the ideological investments of poems; "poems [again all poems] seek . . . to 'falsify' themselves" (7).

I can only speculate why McGann makes poetry itself responsible for the ideological self-subversion that he favors. In previous political criticism—in much of Marxism, for example—a critic's politics could be entrusted to history, which was presumably headed toward the socialist ending that the critic desired. For many reasons this option is closed to McGann, who wisely no longer calls on history to support his



own political choices. Still, he understandably wants those choices to feel not simply desirable but necessary. By sleight of hand (for instance, by the passive voice), he attributes his values to the operation of poetry *per se*. It turns out that "poetical works necessarily involve deconstructive critical functions" (7) at odds with not only these works' own ideological aims but with critics who try to stand in their way ("poems may be at the mercy of their readers, but readers find themselves equally at the hazard of the texts" [8]). When critics obstruct the ideological self-scrutiny triggered by poetry—when, for example, they use poems to enforce rather than contest certain doctrines—they are opposing poetry.

This appeal to poetry seems desperate to me. I can imagine some literary critics thinking twice about opposing poetry, but I doubt that such an argument carries much weight in the culture at large, where, as McGann himself notes, literary works "today do not command much more than a marginal authority and importance."[3] In any case, McGann's reliance on poetry is set up by the default not just of history but of other ways of supporting political change (like "man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains"). Distrust of ends and origins has left poetry "the one form of discourse" (7) that still somehow necessitates liberation.

The apparently inevitable struggle between poetry and ideology occupies the four writers McGann goes on to discuss: William Blake, Lord Byron, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Ezra Pound. Except for Rossetti, each has figured prominently in preceding volumes in this series and much of McGann's analysis goes over what is now familiar ground. Even so, McGann's overview of these writers here gives us an especially clear look at his approach to poetry and his expectations for criticism.

A typical McGann reading begins by acknowledging a poet's intent as stated in the poet's literary works, letters, and notebooks. This intent usually commits the poet to the formalist literary goal of incorporating tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes, only to resolve them in some disinterested synthesis that includes everything and privileges nothing. "Privileging nothing" means simply existing as a self-contained object; "disinterested" means disdaining to advocate a particular ideology or aim at a specific goal. Along these lines, McGann describes Rossetti's dedication to the "pure pursuit of Beauty" (72) and Pound's "quest for Total Form" (105). Blake seems less enamored of this ideal than McGann's other examples. According to McGann, "the balance and reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities form no part . . . of Blake's programme and works" (20). Nevertheless, even Blake sought in art "a complete redemptive scheme" (34) that would not only overcome loss but make it a moment in the imaginative person's regeneration.

Having noted these writers' formalist aspirations, McGann shows how their work fails to accomplish what they set out to achieve. McGann redefines this failure as success at demystifying formalist ideology, or the illusion that a poem can be a self-sufficient organic whole. Whereas Rossetti reluctantly relinquishes his dream of purity, Blake, Byron, and Pound set in motion a process that they cannot control. Blake, for instance, scarred plate

3 of *Jerusalem* as if to introduce one discordant moment or gap that would prevent our seeing the poem as a deliberately finished whole. Later he applied water colors to soften the blow but the damage had already been done to his own ideology of imaginative redemption. Here was one loss not even Blake could recuperate or wish away.

In showing how poems subvert the ideological designs of their authors, McGann often appeals to such physical features of the text as the gouge on plate 3, the typography in *Milton*, the cover, the binding, even the kind of cloth Rossetti wanted for *Poems* of 1870, the borders and capitals in the first editions of *The Cantos*, and the different type-fonts used throughout Pound's work. These details entangle poems in the commercial transactions that literature (in formalist theory) transcends. A seemingly complete product turns out to be an unstable composite provisionally patched together by authors, editors, and publishers.

This emphasis on the often messy process of literary production sets up McGann's view of reading. The works he studies in *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* do not simply result from social actions and decisions; these works are events in history, not objects to be contemplated at a safe distance. McGann's description of Blake fits his other examples: "[The work of art] is fundamentally an action, and to the degree that the 'completed' work reveals it *as* an action, the work is successful. Such an activity then tries to call out in the reader/viewer/ audience a reciprocating response" (13). Merely aesthetic appreciation or censure of these works dodges their demands on us. When McGann notes, for example, that "the *Cantos* is difficult to like or enjoy" (97), I think he means that Pound's political invective has to be read as political. "When the work *is* fascist there is no mistaking the fact" (109), say by claiming irony on Pound's part or by turning Hitler into a metaphor. Such work cries out for a political rather than formalist response. In other words, instead of being resolved aesthetically, Pound's contradictions summon "the reader to intervene" by creating "an opening or gap in the poetry which demands some kind of response" (118). These interventions by the reader "will be as particular as the originary acts of production" (118).

McGann is very hard on readers who turn the other cheek when assaulted by poets like Blake and Pound. Challenged to act, to return fire with fire, these readers opt for merely aesthetic contemplation. McGann calls these readers clerical (they are the academic descendants of Coleridge's clerisy), reactionary (they evade the critique of ideology that literature urges them to take up), hypocritical (they gloss over the complicity of formalist criticism with acts of power), and sentimental (they deny that "the documents of civilization—the writings of the great poets, the readings of the high-minded critics—are all of them, as Benjamin said, equally and at the same time documents of barbarism"[128]).

McGann's concluding sentences explain what he as a critic is trying to accomplish:

> We move towards a literature of knowledge along the trajectory of a desire to change what we believe to be wrong, to repair what we see is broken, and to redeem what we know has been lost. Through poetry we learn how we cannot succeed in any of these quests, and how, on that very account, we are called upon to maintain them, and "not to yield" to their repeated, illusory achievement. (133-34)

"We" here is vague, but I take McGann to be referring to critics as well as poets. He asks us to judge literary criticism not by the position it finally attains but by the quest it undertakes. That quest aims at rectifying what we believe to be wrong or false in poetry, criticism, and the larger world in which literature and criticism intervene. By critiquing all ideology, even the ideology favored by the poet, poetry teaches critics to distrust all presumably final solutions, their own included. A critical project should "[learn] from itself" by constantly searching out "the falsehoods in its own truths"—constantly, because the knowledge acquired in this process "must remain provisional, subject to change, and even sometimes unassimilated at the authoritative level of its consciousness" (57).

In light of these expectations for criticism, I think it fitting that the project McGann began in *The Romantic Ideology* pauses rather than stops in *Towards a Literature of Knowledge*. It is as if McGann were catching his breath rather than finishing up. The trajectory of his considerable critical labors has been defined by McGann's desire to denounce fascist poetry, reactionary criticism, and social barbarism, all in an effort to change what he believes to be wrong. Like the poets he admires, he has provoked comparable activity in his readers, injecting new energy and seriousness in literary criticism, especially in romantic studies.

As McGann's own view of criticism leads us to expect, he sometimes lapses from his own standards. These dead spots in his work, these "resting places and seeming sure points of Reasoning" too firmly held to be doubted (as Keats might put it), include the dogmatic pronouncements about poetry that I noted earlier.[4] I am more concerned, however, with his needing constantly to tell himself "not to yield." This advice, of course, comes from Tennyson's "Ulysses," which is also the source of the epigraph to *Social Values and Poetic Acts* ("Tis not too late to seek a newer world"). For McGann, yielding means giving into the frustration that results when we learn that we must fail in our critical quest to mend what is broken and false. Demoralized, we are tempted to settle for someone else's (always illusory) claim to have achieved what we desire but cannot obtain. The injunction "not to yield" calls attention to this temptation even as it tries to combat it.

As already suggested, some academic readers (myself included) have been energized watching McGann work through this series of books, as if he were proving that criticism can again have political meaning. I fear this response will be short-lived because

McGann disavows any hope for success or evidence of progress in his critical quest. His doubts about the possibility of progress may explain why *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* revisits the texts and examples of McGann's earlier books. Within the book, even McGann's examples repeat themselves like variations on a musical theme, with Pound, for instance, sounding like Blake, albeit in a fascist key. McGann repeats himself because he has to; he must start all over again because in his own mind he has not gotten anywhere. More exactly, he cannot get anywhere in his attempt to rectify what he thinks is wrong. Poetry, however, calls upon him to sustain his quest even as poetry tells him that his quest must fail.

I think McGann's predicament here has less to do with the teachings of poetry than with his bleak situation as a putatively radical American academic critic working without any guarantee that he can "deliver poetry from reactionary hands" (132).[5] In the terms of "Ulysses," although he wants to say much remains (thanks to poetry), he has to concede much has been taken, or at any rate much more political support is needed to make us confident that some constructive work may yet be done. Lacking this support, McGann mounts a holding action designed not to build a better world but to keep our current one from getting even worse. He is treading water so that he won't drown; he presumably cannot move ahead.

I do not have an answer to this problem but I do want to emphasize one of its consequences. As McGann retreats from the claim to improve the world, he approaches the formalism he has criticized. The best formalist critics—Northrop Frye and many of the New Critics, for example—also praise the study of literature for checking our otherwise inevitable drift toward what Frye calls a "self-policing state," or a "society incapable of formulating an articulate criticism of itself and of developing a will to act in its light."[6] Frye, too, sees "continually in the world around us . . . a constant and steady perversion of the vision of a free and equal social future."[7] Literature controls the damage that will always be done to this vision.

Such claims on behalf of literature have disappointed many activist critics, who want not simply to hold the line against barbarism but to reduce and maybe even eliminate it. I count McGann among these critics. The appeal of his work has resulted from his daring us to hope for more than formalist critics accept: hence the force of his pledge that it is not too late to seek a newer world. In *Towards a Literature of Knowledge*, however, seeking a newer world replaces any prospect of finding one. McGann's political disappointment in formalism threatens to overtake his own work.

[1] See my essay-review of *Social Values and Poetic Acts* in *Blake* 23 (1989): 32-39.

[2] Still another dictum along these lines occurs in McGann's discussion of the *Cantos*: "[The poem] is particular on these matters, as it should be; for being particular is what poetry does, is what poetry is supposed to do" (109).

[3] Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1988) 96.

[4] Some of McGann's political judgments also seem too sure. Although I sympathize with his saying of the *Cantos* "when the work *is* fascist there is no mistaking the fact" (109), he never spells out, let alone argues for, his definition of "fascist." Making political terms problematic or undecidable (as in "Who's to say what is fascist?") can be a way of avoiding judgments we must make. But McGann's brusque assertion comes close to political stone-kicking.

[5] McGann is describing his own society when he says that "in a society like Rossetti's, so luxurious and self-deceived, to attempt an exposition of 'the good' is to run in peril of mere cant, while to leave the 'ill' to guesswork and generality is to court inconsequence" (84). McGann's account of Rossetti's poetry also fits his own criticism: "This is an art difficult to practice, the index of a world not easy to survive" (95).

[6] Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1967) 45.

[7] Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980) 17.