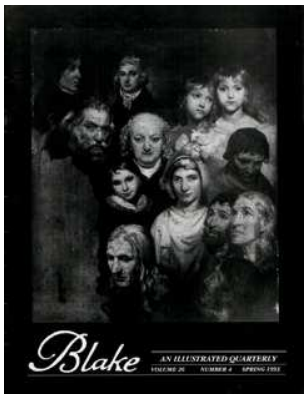
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W



William Blake—A Man Without Marx

John Vice

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 26, Issue 4, Spring 1993, pp. 162-165

REVIEWS

William Blake—A Man Without Marx

John Vice

I

In 1953, 10 years after Jacob Bronowski had written his acclaimed biography of William Blake, *A Man Without A Mask*,[1] he arrived in New York's port authority with book in hand. The United States was then in the ugly grip of McCarthyism, so Bronowski was met by a customs officer whose job was to read all imported literature and to weed out anything that was deemed to be un-American, particularly what was socialist or communist. Bronowski recalled the awkward moment when the official began flicking through the Blake biography: "I thought, 'we may be in trouble, there are all kinds of references to Karl Marx, socialism, the Industrial Revolution and other taboo subjects.'" But the customs officer, astonished after reading just two sentences, said, "You write this, bud? Psshh, this ain't never gonna be no best seller!"[2]

Many literary critics, who have pointed to a methodological affinity between Marxism and the approach in Bronowski's book, would argue that the customs officer should have been more alert to the red menace in *A Man Without A Mask*. One month after it was published, *The Listener* first made charges about its Marxist connection: "Bronowski's method of interpreting Blake derives from Marx."[3] Two months later, in July 1944, Herbert Read announced that Bronowski presented "A Marxian Blake" and criticized the result.[4] Kathleen Raine agreed with both diagnosis and criticism:

> Mr Bronowski, while not in the narrowest sense a Marxist, assumes dialectical materialism as a standard of reference . . . The result is *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark—or should one say the *Divina Comedia* without God? Mr Bronowski may consider the Marxists right and Blake wrong, but he cannot persuade us that Blake was ever a materialist.[5]

Twenty-five years later she dismissed the book with greater brevity as "A Marxist view of Blake,"[6] and later still asserted, "His book on Blake is excellent as sociology of the turn of the eighteenth century, but when he tries to write about the poems he shows no understanding of them at all. He had not that kind of mind."[7] Likewise, Maynard Solomon traced the book's influence to its connection with the Marxist critic Christopher Caudwell: "Jacob Bronowski . . . would acknowledge himself neither a Marxist nor a Caudwellian, but he came closer to utilizing Caudwell's poetics than any other critic of British literature."[8]

Now, nearly 50 years after the book's publication, and on the eve of its re-publication, it stands in need of reassessment. I believe that the customs officer was right to overlook its connection with Marxism, because Bronowski's stated aims in the biography contradict those of a Marxist approach. However, the official was wrong to belittle the book's standing—even if it failed to become a best-seller—because it created a new approach to Blake's poetry. Bronowski suggested, for the first time, that Blake was best studied not as an inspired visionary of a private universe but as a realist poet and social critic whose work could only be understood in relation to the major historical events of the late eighteenth century: the American and French revolutions and the Industrial Revolution.

II

Did Bronowski present a Marxist view of Blake in *A Man Without A Mask*? An immediate difficulty with answering that question is that neither Marx nor Engels made a systematic study of aesthetics. As a result, their fragmentary remarks have been cited in support of several mutually exclusive literary theories. However, one thesis that a Marxist approach to literature should involve is that of a particular, determining relationship between the economic base of a society and its superstructure, or culture, including its arts, politics and legal system. As Marx classically put it: "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general."[9] However, the relation between a work of art and its underlying economic or material cause is not necessarily direct, as Engels explained: "It is not that the economic situation is *cause, solely active*, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which *ultimately* always asserts itself."[10]

Bronowski certainly had considerable sympathy with Marx—he argued that Marx, "the greatest of social critics," had carried out "the most searching study of the war of society with itself."[11] He also compared Blake with Marx, decided that they were "driven by the same loves and indignations," and, in what he later called "a climax to the argument of the book," said that Marx's labor theory of value was identical in spirit with the verse in *The Song of Los* that begins, "Shall not the King call for Famine from the heath."[12]

However, there is nothing Marxist about finding connections between the thought of Blake and of Marx. Rather, the charge that Bronowski's book was Marxist derives from the amount of economic detail that he included in his book—nearly 40 pages are devoted to describing details about water pumps, iron furnaces and other features of economic life in eighteenth-century England. The implication behind that charge is that Bronowski discussed economics because it determined Blake's work. Bronowski included such detail, however, not because he was reading Blake by the light of Marxism but because Blake wrote about economic conditions and the social revolution that they brought. One could not, Bronow-

ski felt, understand Blake's language and poetry without such detail:

> The life of Blake, and his thought . . . are there, for all to read, in the history of his time; in the names of Pitt, of Paine, and of Napoleon; in the hopes of rationalists, and in the despair of craftsmen. Until we know these, we shall not understand Blake's poems, we shall not understand his thought, because we shall not speak his language.[13]

Bronowski argued that Blake's language was that not of an Old Testamentary mystic but of a political revolutionary who retreated behind the obscure symbolism of the Prophetic Books only because he feared prosecution for sedition and grew skeptical about the ability of politics to improve people's welfare. Throughout his life, Bronowski felt, Blake's work remained rooted in the social, political and economic conditions in which he lived. The overtly political tones of "The French Revolution" are echoed in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," "America" and "Europe," although they are disguised, often symbolically, in the conflict between Orc or Los and Rintrah or Palamabron. Likewise, Bronowski prefaced his discussion of Blake's Seditious Writings with a description of the economic and political nature of Britain's response to the American and French revolutions because that was what Blake wrote about. Again, Bronowski argued that Blake's theme in the Prophetic Books, especially *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, was the social war that the Industrial Revolution waged against Britain's working classes, and he felt that one could not pierce the sulphurous rhetoric of those poems without understanding that social revolution. Bronowski included political and economic detail, then, not because it conditioned, or was the ultimate cause of, Blake's poetry, but because Blake wrote about politics and economics, and he felt that one could not understand Blake's language or poetry without that detail.

Since Bronowski made no attempt to connect causally the economics of eighteenth-century England with Blake's work, he was able to deal with a criticism that Herbert Read leveled against him, and which is generally raised against Marxist approaches to literature:

> A lot of material which Mr. Bronowski digs up . . . is fascinating, but what has it to do with Blake? Just as much, one would say, as it has to do with William Wordsworth, or Coleridge, or any other poet of the period. The limitations of his method would be experienced by Mr. Bronowski himself if he were to turn now to Wordsworth or Coleridge.[14]

But Bronowski was fully aware of the limitations of his method, as he made clear in a passage to which Read should have paid more attention: "the world in which Blake lived stands stark in the *Songs of Experience*; but it did not of itself make the *Songs of Experience*; and it certainly does not make them good or bad."[15] Moreover, Bronowski felt that the only reason for studying Blake's language was so that a critical or aesthetic judgment about Blake's creative work could be made. Detail about water pumps was merely a preliminary to that aesthetic judgment: "When we have learnt Blake's language, we have still to judge what he said with it."[16]

A second element that is common to many Marxist approaches to literature is a view about the permanence and universality of art. In a controversial passage, Marx wrote: "It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton of its organisation." He went on to say that Ancient Greek art remained "the standard and unattainable ideal" for our, and for every, society, and that it exercised "an eternal charm" over all of us.[17]

Bronowski picked up the same theme about the universal, cross-cultural nature of art, and developed it by saying that because man had a vertical plane of near-symmetry, walked upright and used his hands for tools, he was "fixed to ways of seeing, of thinking, and of behaving which time cannot change unless it changes him."[18] Bronowski felt that Blake explored such universal truths in his poetry: "The kinds of thought and feeling, the kind of truth to which Blake held and for which we read him . . . are not . . . impermanent."[19] Bronowski felt that Blake saw more clearly than virtually any of his contemporaries into the dilemmas of urban life and the hierarchies of power in industrialized society. Blake was a radical dissenter who sided with the individual in all confrontations with authority, and his awareness and exploration of such problems, Bronowski maintained, involved a universal insight into the human condition. Blake's poems, Bronowski said, "speak from one age to another because [they are] founded in experiences which are simple, common, profound, which are human and universal."[20]

Thus far Bronowski's view seems to chime with that of Marx, and of Christopher Caudwell, who, in a passage quoted by Bronowski, argued: "great art . . . has something universal, something timeless and enduring from age to age."[21] However, such a resonance is not sufficient justification for treating Bronowski as a Marxist, for two reasons. First, Marx's view that Greek art exercises "an eternal charm" over all cultures and economic systems has been held by many to be inconsistent with Marxism proper. Max Raphael, for instance, argued with great force that Marx's view was "essentially incompatible with historical materialism"[22]—if the material conditions of a society determine its art, and if all art is class art, then its art cannot hold the same value for a society with a different mode of production. So, although Marx believed in the universality of art, he should not have done, and would not have done if he had made a systematic study of the relation between aesthetics and historical materialism.

Secondly, although Bronowski and Marx had a similar view of the universality of art, that view is not specifically Marxist. It was a central part of Plato's theory of ideal types, and has remained a basic part of western aesthetics since the Renaissance, with

proponents ranging from Kant and Schiller to Schopenhauer and Collingwood. Moreover, Bronowski did not embrace the view on Marxist grounds; his reasons for adopting it derive from Laura Riding's poetics and the threatened Nazi invasion of Britain in 1940 —two parts of western culture that are not usually connected.

In 1933, Bronowski went to live with Laura Riding and Robert Graves in Mallorca, where they edited a small poetry journal. Bronowski quickly fell under the powerful influence of Riding, and, although they eventually fell out after an argument, adopted her view of poetry without hesitation. She felt that "A poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth."[23] Bronowski's first book, *The Poet's Defence*, written three years after leaving Mallorca, was a study of the history of that idea. It could be found, he argued, in the work of all the great poets from Philip Sidney onwards. With phrasing that could have come straight from Riding, Bronowski wrote: "I believe in one worth only: Truth. I defend poetry because I think that it tells that truth."[24] That view implied a particular relation between an artist's work and his or her society, namely that a description of their society could not fully reveal the absolute truths that appear in their best poetry: "The mind of man has a knowledge of Truth beyond the near-truths of science and society. I believe that poetry tells this Truth."[25]

The book, in Bronowski's view, was only a partial success because it failed to persuade critics—Marxists among them—who believed that poetry was merely another social utterance which was given shape by the society in which the poet lived or the class to which he or she belonged. He therefore planned in his next book, which he called *Two Poets: Pope and Blake*, to compare Blake with Alexander Pope, hoping to establish how much the work of either poet owed to his society, and how much was an assertion of poetic Truth, which was independent of that society. Bronowski argued that he could find the eternal truths of poetry

> not by pointing to them, but by pointing to everything else. Everything in the poem which is measurable and common can be listed: the learning, the history, the psychology; the private foibles and the public commonplaces; the wish and the indignation. This book must be full of such lists; and at the end of each it must ask, Is this the whole poem? For if it is not, but only if it is not, there is some truth in the poem which has no social names.[26]

Information about water pumps was relevant to Blake's work, then, both because it was one of Blake's themes and because it was part of one such list of "measurable and common" subjects. One would prove the existence of poetic Truth only if those lists failed to capture all that poetry said. The lists would help to generate a flash of light of empirical data that could be used to create a silhouette of the universal truths of poetry, which could not be illuminated directly.

The book, however, was never published. Bronowski completed it in mid 1941 only to have it rejected by several publishing houses. War did not encourage publishers to take risks with books that might not sell, and Bronowski's book was, as Cambridge University Press told him, "open to the objection that you have pulled history (not to say poetry) over to your side. Your side is an accusation [that could] . . . make the right people uncomfortable, even angry."[27] A controversial book involved publishers in too great a risk during wartime. However, after numerous rejections, Chatto and Windus suggested that Bronowski should use some of the material in the book to write a short study of Blake, which they would be prepared to publish. Bronowski, then working as a mathematics lecturer at University College, Hull,[28] started writing it in mid August 1942 and, remarkably, completed it six weeks later. Several publication dates came and went, because Chatto and Windus were suffering acute paper shortages, but the book eventually appeared in April 1944. The first edition bore the date "1943" on its title page as a scar of its long gestation period.

So *A Man Without A Mask* was originally conceived as part of a larger work that would have proved that great poetry told a truth that was independent of social life. It was also written during wartime, and the truths that it purported to prove, and which Bronowski found in Blake, were those under attack from Nazism: the right of individuals not to be controlled by society, the evils of repression and the value of freedom.[29] The intellectual roots of the book lay with Laura Riding's conception of poetry and the threat to liberalism that Nazism posed; they did not include Marxism or an attempt to show that Blake was a Marxist—even though Blake and Engels share the same birth date.

III

What, today, is the value of Bronowski's book? Its outstanding contribution was, as Bronowski himself put it, that it "gave a new direction to Blake criticism."[30] It rejected for the first time the view that Blake was a mystical visionary whose time and place of birth were mere accidents of fate, by showing that he was a realist poet whose Prophetic Books were best read as social criticism. In 1944 Bronowski feared that such a view would seem "outrageous to everybody."[31] The fact that that view is now a commonplace is a measure of the success of his argument, which has been extended and developed in, for instance, Mark Schorer's *The Politics of Vision* (1946), David Erdman's *William Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954) and Sabri Tabrizi's *The "Heaven" and "Hell" of William Blake* (1973). Bronowski's approach has crucially redirected Blake criticism, as Geoffrey Keynes argued in a review in 1944:

> Mr. Bronowski's book is a real contribution to the study of Blake, for never before have the social and political bearings of his thought been so carefully extracted from the body of his writings, or set so satisfactorily against the background of his time.[32]

Of course Bronowski's work has its faults: for example, he too swiftly dismissed Blake's paintings and engravings, and missed, therefore, the important connections between Blake's art and his poetry; and—a surprising criticism to make of a writer who made his reputation as a popularizer of science, most notably in the television series *The Ascent of Man*—the book is in places badly written and misleading. However, it remains an important and influential reading of Blake. Bronowski made it impossible to regard Blake as an isolated, apolitical muse by showing that in his poetry he lived the hopes and horrors of eighteenth-century England. And Blake was the first to admit that England's grinding poverty, far from improving his work, had helped to shackle it, as he wrote:

> Some people & not a few Artists have asserted that the Painter of this Picture would not have done so well if he had been properly Encourag'd. Let those who think so, reflect on the State of Nations under Poverty & their incapability of Art; tho' Art is Above Either, the Argument is better for Affluence than Poverty; & tho' he would not have been a greater Artist, yet he would have produc'd Greater works of Art in proportion to his means.[33]

[1] The book has gone through a variety of titles: *A Man Without A Mask* when it was first published (London: Secker and Warburg, 1944, and New York: Transatlantic Arts, 1947), *William Blake: 1757-1827* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1954) and *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* in its first major American edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; also London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), when Bronowski added a new introduction. It is due to be reprinted by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in winter 1993. I refer to it throughout as *WB* with page references from, respectively, the 1944, 1954, and 1965 editions.

[2] From J. Bronowski, *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) 138.

[3] Unsigned review, *The Listener*, 18 May 1944.

[4] Herbert Read, "A Marxian Blake," *The New Leader*, 15 July 1944.

[5] Kathleen Raine, *The Dublin Review*, July 1944.

[6] Kathleen Raine, *William Blake* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970) 209.

[7] Correspondence with the author, 3 July 1988.

[8] In Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979) 343.

[9] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, quoted in Solomon, 29.

[10] Friedrich Engels, in a letter to W. Borgius, quoted in Solomon, 33.

[11] *WB* 142, 93/ 204, 137/ 190, 130.

[12] *WB* 142/204/190 and J. Bronowski, "Recollections of Humphrey Jennings," *The Twentieth Century* 165 (1959): 48.

[13] *WB* 15/28/36.

[14] Read, *The New Leader*.

[15] *WB* 17/32/39.

[16] *WB* 17/31/39.

[17] Karl Marx, *Grunrisse, quoted in Solomon 61-62*.

[18] *WB* 138/199/185-86.

[19] *WB* 138/198/185.

[20] J. Bronowski, "A Prophet for our Age," *The Nation* 185 (1957): 411.

[21] Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1957) 339, quoted in *WB* 138/199/185.

[22] Max Raphael, *Proudhon, Marx and Picasso* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1933) 76.

[23] Laura Riding, *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1980) 407.

[24] J. Bronowski, *The Poet's Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1939) 10.

[25] Bronowski, *The Poet's Defence* 11.

[26] Bronowski's manuscript for *Two Poets: Pope and Blake*, private collection, 2.

[27] Letter from J. Kendon to J. Bronowski, 5 May 1944, Bronowski papers, University of Toronto, box 133.

[28] In the introduction to *WB* 1965 Bronowski said: "the body of this book was written in 1942. At that time, I was working every day of the week at the tasks of destruction which war sets for a scientist" (16). However, in 1942 Bronowski was still a mathematics lecturer at University College, Hull. He became involved with the mathematics of bombing strategies when he was recruited by the Ministry of Home Security in May 1943.

[29] See *WB* 136-44/197-206/183-91.

[30] J. Bronowski, *The Visionary Eye* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1978) 3.

[31] Bronowski, "Recollections" 48.

[32] Geoffrey Keynes, "William Blake," *Time and Tide*, 3 June 1944.

[33] I am indebted to Harriet Coles and Sue Vice for their perceptive comments on this article.