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R E V I E W

Peter Otto, Constructive Vision and Visionary
Deconstruction: Los, Eternity, and the Productions
of Time in the Later Poetry of William Blake

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Peter Otto. *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction: Los, Eternity, and the Productions of Time in the Later Poetry of William Blake*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. xi + 244 pp. \$55.20.

Reviewed by
V. A. De Luca

Peter Otto's book, though flawed in a number of ways, has at its core an interesting and valuable idea about Blake. Otto takes aim at the idealist or monistic conception of Blake, associated chiefly with Northrop Frye, in which "reality" is held to be the creation of an "autonomous" or, in Otto's preferred phrase, "world-forming" Imagination. In its place Otto offers us the notion of a Blake who accepts difference and otherness and who seeks to reach beyond the perimeters of the self to establish a humane and vitalizing relationship with this other domain. Instead of possessing the whole of reality within an individual creative consciousness, as the idealists' Blake is said to do, this Blake turns his face instead to an as-yet unknown and unpossessed world of potentiality, rich with the possibilities of mutual exchange.

This is in itself an attractive thesis and a useful corrective to those critics so preoccupied with the idea of the individual as creator of his world that they give us a Blake who borders on solipsism. We have little further need of a criticism so intent on eradicating from Blake's thought perceptions of difference—then and now, here and there, outside and inside, me and you—that a monadic absurdity is produced. We are all familiar with the kind of commentary that asserts that the whole history of the world and its myriad productions from the creation

to the final apocalypse are "really" no more than a single event occupying a single moment in the mind of a single consciousness, Albion. If this barren and reductive conception were a true representation of what Blake is trying to say, it would not be clear why he should continue to interest us. But of course no obvious formulation of this conception is to be found anywhere in Blake's works, and indeed it is belied by the fascination with the rich world of temporal and spatial differences that these works everywhere display.

Thus any attempt, such as Otto's, to modify or refute the radically monistic conception of Blake is to be welcomed as a valuable contribution to the ongoing work of criticism on this poet. Unfortunately the value of such an attempt is greatly diminished if the plan and method of the critique are ill conceived and ill calculated to persuade. Despite the evidence of sophisticated ideas and lucid expression in many passages, *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction* is hobbled by an overall weakness in the treatment of its subject. It suffers from both an excess of busy philosophizing on abstract themes and a shortage of carefully established philosophical premises. Otto tells us in his Acknowledgments that "the book began life as a doctoral dissertation," and it would seem that subsequently it has not made much progress toward a maturer stage. At least it displays a number of flaws commonly associated with the dissertation stage: a dogged and tendentious pursuit of the argument conducted on a rarified plane of abstraction, a belligerence toward the previous body of criticism (whose errors have to be itemized from the outset), a tendency toward jargon and formulaic phrasing, and a plodding, unimaginative mode of exposition (most of the book consists of an extended plate-by-plate commentary on *Milton* and *Jerusalem*—each plate confirming the idea of Blake which the author alone among the critics has discovered; one would have thought that Blake criticism had outgrown this approach by now.)

CONSTRUCTIVE VISION AND VISIONARY DECONSTRUCTION

*Los, Eternity, and the Productions of Time
in the Later Poetry of William Blake*



PETER OTTO



CLARENDON PRESS OXFORD

These blemishes, although irritating to the reader, would finally not matter much, if the intellectual argument as a whole were persuasive in its logic and progression from clearly established premises. Otto is clearly familiar with fundamental issues in epistemology and metaphysics, and the names of eminent philosophers, ancient and modern, parade through the book. But his own method of argument tends to proceed more by ungrounded assertions, associative leaps, and rhetorical sleights of hand than by rigorous philosophical analysis. Take, for example, a key premise underlying Otto's reading of *Jerusalem*, namely that the poem presents itself as an experience of linear or fallen time. My concern is not with the correctness of this view but rather with the ease and rapidity with which it is established. Citing the chapters of equal length and the periodic recurrence of design arrangements, Otto declares, "this regular measured form suggests that the subject matter of *Jerusalem* will be organized according to an absolute time such as that proposed by Newton in the *Principia*. On this level, *Jerusalem* appears to be a remarkable product of

the horological revolution; it is a time-piece capable of measuring out the linear succession of 'nows' which characterize chronological and everyday time" (101). The sweeping confidence of these assertions may distract us from the looseness of the logic and from certain nagging questions—such as the following: What is absolute time? Why is there no description of Newton's concept so that the reader will have it more clearly in mind? What in fact does Blake's neat four-unit package have in common with the infinitely extended line that is Newtonian time? Is a poem whose *subject matter* is organized according to a temporal principle the same thing as an actual timepiece? In what sense is *Jerusalem* a timepiece—can the text of the poem substitute for a Rolex watch and get us to work on time? If not, if we are only in the presence of a hyperbolic trope, what can we say of the truth value of the assertion? And finally, what are we to make of the surreptitious movement of the verbs in the passage quoted, from the "suggests" of the first clause, to the "appears to be" of the second, to the flat "it is" of the third, on which a superstructure of commentary proceeds to be built?

Such close scrutiny of Otto's indeterminacies could be applied to many other passages in the book, with similar results. The slippery and elliptical kind of reasoning seen here becomes especially disturbing when it is employed to establish the major premises of the book's argument or to challenge the consensus critical position on Blake. Here, for example, is Otto confronting Northrop Frye, the arch-exponent of that position: "When one turns to Blake's poems one finds that many of the texts which are used by Frye or those influenced by his criticism to support his case for the redemptive power of the . . . world-forming imagination contradict such a claim" (12). Otto then goes on to cite the famous passage in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* where Blake contrasts the vision of the sun as "somewhat like a Guinea" to his own perception of it as a great "Heavenly host." Otto comments:

Frye interprets this passage in the following way: "The Hallelujah-Chorus perception of the sun makes a far more real sun than the guinea-sun because more imagination has gone into perceiving it." This seems to me to miss the point. The perception of the sun as a guinea is tied to the economy of the self. A guinea is something we can use. . . . The vision of the sun as a Hallelujah-Chorus is, however, radically different. It is of course, still a perception, but now it is one which has been interpenetrated with others. Those others can talk, move, sing, and can therefore suffuse the self with a force which cannot be reduced to our perception of them. The world formed by Frye's imagination discovers within its bounds a force and presence which far exceeds its domain. (12)

For the sake of argument let us grant that the passage of Frye that Otto cites may not be the happiest instance of explication in *Fearful Symmetry*. But compared with Otto's, Frye's explanation of the Blake text is a model of clear sober reasoning. If anyone is forming worlds here, it is Otto himself, who embarks on a fantasia of association and speculation that does little justice to either Blake's or Frye's statements. Note for example, how Blake's similitude of "somewhat like a Guinea" (a size comparison only) is converted, through an associative leap, to an actual coin, which Otto can then enlist in his ongoing program of chastisements of the materialistic or corporeal self. Note also the astonishing expansion of Blake's "company of the Heavenly Host" into a busy society of beings who "can talk, move, sing," and perhaps perform in yet other ways that Blake does not mention. Where does Blake speak of this host as "suffusing the self with a force"? As for Frye, where does he speak of setting "bounds" to how much reality there is in the angelic view of the sun? What exactly is "Frye's imagination" imagining that Blake did not imagine before him? In these instances, Otto is simply asserting things that have no existence in the texts in front of him. And this critique of Otto's commentary still leaves untouched the tangled contradictions and equivocations of its own internal logic. Note the surreptitious insertion of the unearned "therefore"

in the penultimate sentence; the equivocal "perception . . . interpenetrated with others," which may mean interpenetrated with other perceptions—in which case we are still left with the "world-forming" imagination—or else perceptions interpenetrated with non-perceptions, which seems a logical impossibility; finally, the conundrum of an imagination that can "discover" within its scope "a presence" that at the same time it cannot discover because the presence exceeds its scope.

If Otto's argumentative resources can so easily self-destruct even at such a critically necessary point in his project as the confrontation and refutation of Frye, then one is reluctantly led to certain damaging surmises about the project as a whole. It seems that either Otto has published before having fully worked out a form of presentation that would give a tight cogency to his subject (in which case the Clarendon Press must share some of the blame) or else he lacks a gift for philosophic discourse equal to his interest in philosophic concerns. Whatever the reasons for the book's problems, it is nonetheless clear that no amount of pre-publication improvement could have eliminated its central intellectual flaw (since it forms the basis of his thesis), which is that Otto deliberately and persistently conflates the world-forming imagination of the idealist tradition with the Urizenic making of enclosed, exclusionary worlds internally governed by Newtonian and Lockean principles. In his conclusion, Otto tells us that "in Blake's *oeuvre* the autonomous imagination of the Romantics is subject to a visionary deconstruction" (221), which is all very well if one accepts his identification of the romantic imagination with Blake's idea of Urizenic perception. But before accepting the identification, one would want to have from Otto a much more thorough understanding of what actually constitutes the romantic imagination—in other words, a pertinent examination of such relevant texts as Coleridge's critical writings (and not just a passing glance at Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*), Wordsworth's *Pre-*

lude, Shelley's *Defence*, Keats's letters, even the later poetry of Wallace Stevens, as well as some account of hermetic and neoplatonic antecedents. Needless to say, Otto provides none of this, and hence we have no way of knowing whether he has any clear understanding of the concept or of the differences to be found among its classic formulations—although we can sense that he has spared himself the need of explaining away any differences between, say, Keats's "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" and say, Urizen's intention to create a world ruled by "One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law." This is not the occasion to elaborate the differences between the expansive, open-ended, transformative, and fluid characteristics of the "autonomous" romantic imagination, and the reductive, closed, fixed, and solidifying characteristics of the world made by Lockean and Newtonian perceivers; one need only point out that Otto should show some awareness of these differences, and if he genuinely believes that these differences are illusory, that the similarities are more profound and basic, he should attempt to convince his reader with well-grounded, patient, step-by-step arguments.

The easier course, however, is to attempt something tried and true, namely a Blakean critique of Lockean conceptions—and this Otto accomplishes reasonably successfully—while seeming radical and new, by an arbitrary relabeling of Lockean empiricism as romantic idealism. In so doing, Otto aligns himself with those currently flourishing Schools of Resentment that are engaged in undermining further the fading prestige of romanticism in general and Frye in particular. But this gesture toward fashion—like the hasty apology at the end of the Introduction for not discussing sexism in his book (32)—is somewhat half-hearted, and no radical polemic damaging to

romanticism really emerges in this study. The same tentative quality is apparent in Otto's dealings with that even more fashionable movement of our critical era, deconstruction. On the one hand, Otto seems to want to advertise the book's connection with deconstruction, most conspicuously by lodging the term in the title itself and by using it generously throughout his commentary. On the other hand, Otto performs nothing remotely like a rigorous deconstructionist analysis in his treatment of themes and text. Indeed, some of the most valuable and thoughtful remarks in the whole book are devoted to showing the limitations of Derrida's analysis when applied to Blake (see 24-27). One emerges with the impression that the deconstructionist references are more for show than for practical use.

These equivocations, like the extravagant assertions, the need to display intimate acquaintance with the philosophers, the hand-is-quicker-than-the-eye modes of argument, all bespeak a certain insecurity on Otto's part about his project, a lack perhaps of a confident mastery of the subject that can spread conviction to his readers. This is a pity, for there is the germ here of a truly interesting and useful book on the limitations of radically monistic or solipsistic conceptions of Blake (which conceivably Otto could undertake some time in the future). As it stands, *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction* succeeds only in resembling too many other interpretive books on major poets, books that appear in print before they have found an adequate form to embody their intentions, that show less of an interest in the texture of the poetry than in abstract ideas, that are more comfortable with the milieu of such ideas than with genuine analytic rigor, that flirt with Derridean nihilism, and show uneasiness with a romantic humanism that they have in no way escaped. That there is evidence here of an unseized potential for something far finer is the chief regret one has in reading this book.

DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

Reply to De Luca's review of *Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction*

by Peter Otto

After allowing that *Constructive Vision* "has at its core an interesting and valuable idea about Blake," De Luca's critique gets underway with the assertion that the book's "argument tends to proceed more by ungrounded assertions, associative leaps, and rhetorical sleights of hand than by rigorous philosophical analysis." I suppose that as the author of the book I should just accept De Luca's vigorous and rhetorical strictures and leave it at that. However, in this instance the right of reply has proved too tempting, though I will try to confine myself to a few brief remarks.

De Luca's first example of "ungrounded assertions, associative leaps, and rhetorical sleights of hand" is a parallel between Newtonian time and the "ORDERD RACE" (26, E 171) of *Jerusalem* that is drawn in the first paragraph of the third chapter of *Constructive Vision*. I am happy to believe that almost all of the issues that would arise from this conjunction are left unexplained or undeveloped in this paragraph—it is after all an introductory paragraph—but De Luca wants to argue that the reading of *Jerusalem* contained by the last four chapters of *Constructive Vision* somehow depends upon connections established here. According to De Luca, in this small paragraph a parallel between *Jerusalem* and fallen time is established on which an entire "superstructure of commentary proceeds to be built." In fact, this opening and introductory paragraph is in no sense the ground of the reading that follows.