

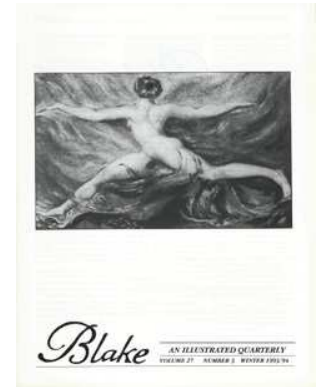
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s*

Morton D. Paley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 27, Issue 3, Winter 1993-1994, pp. 86-88



phesies, all of which are read as "the torments of Love & Jealousy in The Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man," or as a "history of the human heart" (167-68). In Cox's terms, the complexity of these poems results from Blake's attempt to set competing forms of logical thought side by side within the same text, rather than working through one possible logical organization of love as each of the shorter poems does. By working inward from Blake's logical method to the vision that method produces, Cox arrives at significant insights into the origins of sexual love and jealousy (consequences of dualistic thought itself), and the meaning of substantializations such as Beulah ("an effort to work out the logical conditions of an environment in which spiritual love can inhabit temporality," 231) or the Spectre of Los (a necessary parody of logic). Blake's solution to the torments of love and jealousy is a substantial and uncompromising vision of Christian love, a logical principle of redemption which can harmonize previously competing conceptual drives such as universality and individual identification.

Ironically, when viewed from this perspective Blake's method can come across as rather postmodern: instead of grand narratives, his major prophecies offer heterogeneity and continuous experimentation with logic. Cox indeed argues that Blake and postmodernism share some forms of logical thought ("The great problem of Blake and the postmodernists is the habit of imputing to propositions and logical operations the characteristics of substantial things" [235]), but they differ on the crucial issue of representation. In Blake's major prophecies the logical principles that he initially shares with postmodernism are taken a step further, toward a paradoxical "parody of a parody, a reproduction of reproductions" for which Cox coins the noun "paralectic" (239-40). Paralectic is the method of salvation in Blake's later works, a logical method by which Blakean realities are represented as parodic likenesses of a

material world that Blake knows and demonstrates to be itself a parody of the eternal world. This is the culmination of Blake's substantializing logic, and of Cox's predominantly spatializing explication of that logic (demonstrated, for instance, by his persistent interest in terms which etymologically convey some sort of positioning, such as "parody" and "dialectic"). Spatializing logic of this kind (which is again reminiscent of Frye) allows for a distinction between the postmodernists' "paradox," which is undecidability, and paradox in Blake, which literally means two beliefs existing side by side. Ultimately, the difference between Blake and the postmodernists resides in Blake's conviction and demonstration that paradox and indeterminacy, far from undermining the concept of objective truth, instead verify the existence of a truth beyond the power of human representation. Discussing Los's laborious efforts in building Golgonooza, Cox concludes that

The final effect is not, however, a denial of the power of vision; and it is not an affirmation of the value of mystery or indeterminacy. . . . It is, rather, a sign that Blakean visions are not emptily self-reflexive but are imperfect and unapologetically inelegant aids to the contemplation of a truth beyond themselves. (270-71)

Not least among the strengths of Cox's argument is its ability to contain its own opposition, by a process analogous to the way Blake himself (according to Cox) contains negations by substantializing them and assigning them a place in his logical system. Cox agrees that there is profound indeterminacy in Blake's vision, only he redefines indeterminacy so that it is not limitlessness of meaning, but rather a kind of pluralism which results from Blake's "constantly varying involvement with logic," his "multiplication of logical strategies that organize meanings in a variety of momentarily determinate ways" (10). If, as Cox seems to suggest in his opening chapter, the mid-twentieth-century critics who set

out to elucidate Blake's system represented a certain innocence that has given way to the experienced state of postmodernist criticism, then Cox's own book represents a kind of organized innocence that is able to contain the postmodernist vision as a systematic part of a larger whole.

Still, it is worthwhile to have someone remind us, from a strongly intentionalist, mildly historicist perspective, that Blake did care more for mastery, persuasion, clarity, and a stable truth than many contemporary critics would comfortably admit. Blake's language and imagery, his psychology and his ideology continue to be fair game for critics fascinated by the capacity for play in his kaleidoscopic work. But these readings will also continue to contend with a tradition of interpretation which emphasizes the coherence and teleology of Blake's thought, a tradition now infused with new energy by *Love and Logic*.

Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. \$59.00.

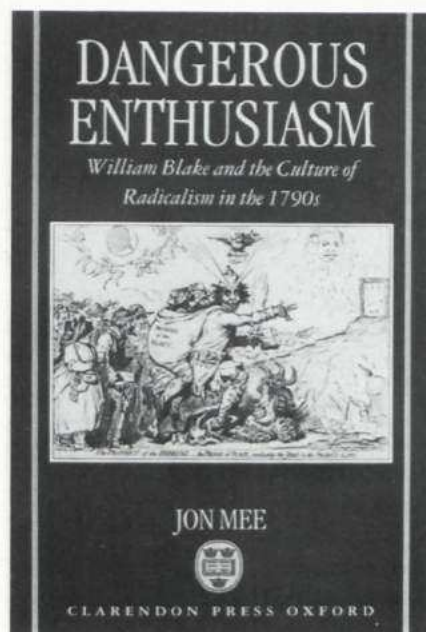
Reviewed by
Morton D. Paley

In the Introduction to the last annotated checklist, Detlef W. Dörrbecker remarked that "Blake's *revolutionary inclinations*, especially during the 1790s, are presently being studied with fresh momentum, and a new understanding of Blake's radical position is unfolding" (*Blake* 26 [1992/93]: 77). *Dangerous Enthusiasm* is an important contribution to that new understanding, while at the same time pointing the way to new areas of

research to be accomplished. It is particularly valuable for its consideration of the contexts provided by the writings of Richard Brothers and his circle, by deists such as Paine and Constantin Volney, by translations of "Northern" antiquities, and by the new biblical scholarship of Bishop Robert Lowth and (slightly later) Alexander Geddes. Some of this material has been covered before and some of it is new, but by bringing together subject areas often considered discretely, *Dangerous Enthusiasm* provides a valuable perspective on the study of Blake in his time.

Before one gets to the very interesting subject matter of this book, however, one must pass the Polypus: "Introduction: Blake the Bricoleur." At first the idea of Blake as a Levi-Straussian *bricoleur* may seem an attractive way of comprehending his spontaneity, his inventiveness, and his willingness to try often unconventional artistic solutions. Yet there is so much more to Blake's work than this that regarding it as *bricolage* seriously, if unintentionally, diminishes it. Blake himself would insist on his relation to Renaissance tradition, his mastery of his craft, and his concern for the public role of art. When the notion of Blake-as-bricoleur is brought in at the conclusion of the book in contrasting Blake with painters like Fuseli and poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, we can see how deficient the idea is. It's just a step from this to the amiably wise crank invented by the Ancients. But the Illustrations of the Book of Job are not bricolage; they are great works of art.

This said, it must be added that the bricolage syndrome is hardly disabling to *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, which, for the most part, gets on very well without it. Chapter 1 explores the territory of radical millenarianism and is especially valuable for its discussion of writings and engravings by such figures as George Riebau and Garnet Terry, among others. The linking of figures like Terry with seventeenth-century radicalism is very interestingly estab-



lished in a discussion of his editions of John Saltmarsh's *Free Grace* and Samuel (Cobbler) How's *The Sufficiency of the Spirit's Teaching*. These associations, as Mee points out, are further enriched by the fact that the publisher of the How sermon was J. S. Jordan, member of the London Corresponding Society and first publisher of Paine's *Rights of Man*. One might wish that the choice of an engraving from Terry's *Prophetical Extracts* for reproduction and discussion had not been limited to *Daniel's Great Image*, since (as the author notes) this plate has already been reproduced in an article by David Bindman. Terry's series of reprinted prophecies, which Mee aptly calls "a rich millenarian stew," is very rare, and some of the other images are also of great interest. No. IV, for example, shows Christ and Satan in overlapping discs with the body of man in the overlapping area; No. V shows the Beast from the Sea in Revelation confronted by an angel with a shield and a flaming sword. Numerous analogies in both Blake's works and in his visual sources come to mind. One must, needless to say, be grateful for the highly interesting material presented in this chapter, particularly as it is handled with considerable tact. No attempt is made to force parallels into sources, the distinction

as well as the similarity between Blake's work and these parallels is observed, and useful demarcations are established within the phenomenon of millenarianism itself.

While some figures prominent in late eighteenth-century millenarian movement are well discussed in chapter 1, other individuals could be given more attention. This is especially true of the Swedenborgians, who are negatively viewed here as the Angels of Blake's *Marriage*. Yet there are other aspects of the Swedenborgian movement that are both important in themselves and pertinent to this book's subject. The words of one of Satan's Watch Fiends, William Hamilton Reid, whose *Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies of London* (1800) is quoted elsewhere in *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, may be instructive here: "The principal article of this self-called New Church, it should be observed, is just as Old as Muggleton and Reeves . . . that the whole godhead is circumscribed in the person of Jesus Christ, . . . retaining the human form in heaven . . ." (53). If the Swedenborgian Divine Humanity could be so threatening to conservatives, what of the thought of someone like Charles Bernhard Wadström, the Swedish anti-slavery activist who, though expelled in the concubinage dispute of 1790, remained a Swedenborgian and lived in England for at least several years following? One would like to know something about Samuel Best, the Swedenborgian millenarian prophet known as "Poor Helps," and about Ralph Maher or Mather, who passed through various phases of seeking, including Methodism and Swedenborgianism, and who made contact with the Prophets of Avignon in the last phase of their existence.¹ Neither Wadström nor Best are mentioned in *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, while Malthus is named but not discussed. To say this is perhaps not so much to criticize *Dangerous Enthusiasm* as to point out the need for a larger and more comprehensive book on the mil-

lenarian and radical subcultures of the period.

Chapter 2, "Northern Antiquities," valuably explores the intersection of antiquarian and radical interests. Macpherson's *Ossian*, Joseph Ritson's writings on English songs, Edward Williams' Celtic researches, and Daniel Isaac Eaton's *Politics for the People* are among the sources explored in relation to Blake's works of the 1790s. Eaton's comparison of England's war against France with the "ferocious Odin . . . the active roaring deity; the father of slaughter, the God that carrieth desolation and fire" (99) aptly demonstrates how Blake participates in a shared radical discourse; and once more, there are cogent distinctions between Blake and, for example, "the disabling nostalgia of literary primitivists like Macpherson and Blair" (108-09). From this rich discussion, we go on to a chapter on mythology and politics that creates a context for *Los* as prophet and bard among authors as diverse as Thomas Paine, Constantin Volney, and Thomas Spence, among others. The concern is once more not so much with sources as with, as the author puts it in discussing the image of the sun of liberty, "the deep involvement of Blake's rhetorical resources, both written and visual in the Revolution controversy" (136). Later, the mythological-scientific poetry and prose of Erasmus Darwin is examined in relation to parts of *Europe*, *The Book of Los*, and *The Song of Los*. Some of this ground has, as the author acknowledges, been covered before, and this part of the exposition is more valuable for consolidating what is already known than for fresh insights. The same may be said for much of chapter 4: "Blake, the Bible, and Its Critics in the 1790s." The work of Alexander Geddes, whose biblical scholarship is an important topic here, has been discussed, as Mee notes, by Jerome McGann, and so the matter of "textual indeterminacy" will already be familiar to some readers. Viewing Geddes's biblical criticism with that of Priestley, Paine, and other contemporaries does

produce an interesting perspective. However, when specific Blakean texts are discussed in connection with the Bible here, the results are not as colored by the preceding historical discussion as one would expect; and although the author vigorously argues for a political reading of *The Song of Los* in opposition to the view of Leslie Tannenbaum in *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (1984), no hypothesis is advanced to account for the phenomenon of diminution evident—both in length and in number of copies produced—in the 1795 Lambeth books.

One further point, not as a conclusion, but as an endnote: *Dangerous Enthusiasm* is a richly documented book, with respect to both primary sources and to recent criticism and scholarship, yet there are some puzzling gaps in its documentation involving the omission of particularly important sources. A footnote reference to Hayley's *Life of Milton* (218) refers to several modern scholars, but not to the one who has written most extensively on this subject in relation to Blake: Joseph Anthony Wittreich. The author refers to "the boom in speculative mythography which gathered pace in the eighteenth century" (124-25) but not to the classic study of this subject, Edward B. Hungerford's *Shores of Darkness* (1941), in which the term "speculative mythology" was coined. Although some discussions of Blake's derivation of the "Druid" serpent temples from William Stukeley are cited, there is no mention of why we know that Blake, who never mentions Stukeley, was nonetheless indebted to him: Ruthven Todd's discovery (in *Tracks in the Snow* [1946] 48-49) that the serpent temple of *Jerusalem* 100 is based on one of the engravings in Stukeley's *Abury*. In the discussion of Blake's engraving after Fuseli of *The Fertilization of Egypt* (157-59) Todd's article "Two Blake Prints and Two Fuseli Drawings,"² would have been pertinent to the question of "collaboration between daughtsmen and engravers" (157n), as

that design is one of the two discussed. It is surprising that a work with the historical awareness of *Dangerous Enthusiasm* should at times show such unawareness of the history of its own discipline.

¹ Interestingly Ma[t]her had had links with working-class radicalism more direct than those of many seekers. In a pamphlet of 1780, *An Impartial Representation of the Case of the Poor Cotton Spinners of Lancashire*, he had spoken in the voice of unemployed weavers who had destroyed spinning jennies: "We pulled down and demolished several of these machines," he wrote, speaking for "men and women, prisoners in the castle of Lancaster," who were, he said, about to be tried by a jury largely composed of relatives of the machine owners (15-16).

² *Blake* 5 (1971/72): 173-81.

Linda Lewis. *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake, and Shelley*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992. xii + 223 pp. \$34.95.

Reviewed by
George Anthony Rosso

This readable book treats the mythic figures of Prometheus and the Titans as "political icons" in the work of Aeschylus, Dante, Milton, Blake, and Shelley. Binding Stuart Curran's discrepant versions of Prometheus (in *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* [1975] and "The Political Prometheus" [Studies in Romanticism 1986]), Lewis pursues a "diachronic study" of Promethean myth, tracking its modifications and new meanings, but "only inasmuch as these meanings apply to the study of power and powerlessness" (11). With something of Northrop Frye's allusive range—minus his insights into genre—she al-