

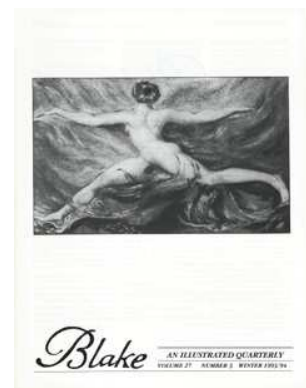
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R E V I E W

David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820*

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of the hiding and finding of Moses—subjects that Blake later painted (81).

Far outnumbering such tantalizing tidbits are Behrendt's many informative and commendable discussions of such topics as: (1) "open" texts parallel to Blake's in eighteenth-century fiction, history painting, caricature, and cartoons; (2) his interest in various forms of music, especially hymns and religious songs for children; (3) the primping nurse in "Nurses Song" (*Experience*); (4) the senses and their representation in *Visions*; (5) multiple parallels among designs within and between Blake's works; (6) similar parallels between his designs and eighteenth-century illustrations of Miltonic subjects; and (7) late eighteenth-century millenarianism and its dependence (like that of Blake's work) on a highly attentive audience. Despite my quibbles raised earlier (mostly as matters of emphasis, not substance) and despite the inattentiveness of its copy editor, *Reading William Blake* is a fine book. With its overall focus, breadth, and lucidity

and with its 16 well chosen, nicely reproduced, and appropriately discussed plates, the book constitutes a splendid advanced introduction to Blake—well suited to upper-division English majors, graduate students, and anyone else seeking a concise but well-informed *entrée* into Blake's illuminated work.

¹ For two of the most important sources on Locke's understanding of autonomous self-consciousness and its relationships to reason, memory, self-concernment, and moral as well as political "independence," see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 2.27; and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education, The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James L. Axtell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 109-325.

² See Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love," *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 324-25; Michael Fischer, "Accepting the Romantics as Philosophers," *Philosophy and Literature* 12 (1988): 186; and Morris Eaves, *William Blake's Theory of Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 193.

³ See Locke, *Essay* 2.27.22, 26 and 3.11.16; Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Imagination*

as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism (Berkeley: U of California P, 1960) 44, 48; and Antony Flew, "Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity," *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong (New York: Anchor, 1968) 155.

⁴ Jean H. Hagstrum, "Towards a Profile of the Word Conscious in Eighteenth-Century Literature," *Psychology and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Christopher Fox (New York: AMS, 1987) 27.

⁵ See James A. W. Heffernan, "Blake's Oothoon: The Dilemmas of Marginality," *Studies in Romanticism* 30 (1991): 12 and 14n20.

⁶ Myra Glazer-Schotz, "Blake's Little Black Boys: On the Dynamics of Blake's Composite Art," *Colby Library Quarterly* 16 (1980): 220-36; Myra Glazer-Schotz and Gerda Norvig, "Blake's Book of Changes: On Viewing Three Copies of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*," *Blake Studies* 9 (1980): 100-21.

⁷ Graham Pechey, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Text and its Conjunction," *Oxford Literary Review* 3 (1979): 54-76.

⁸ Joseph Viscomi, *The Art of William Blake's Illuminated Prints* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester Etching Workshop, 1983).

⁹ Cited above in n. 2.

David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992. 236 + ix pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by
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It seems fair to say that in recent years, and until very recently, the social and political history of British modernity has been dominated by the left. Between them, Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm have narrativized the periods between and including the English Revolution of the 1640s and the French Revolu-

tions of 1789 and 1848. Their books, and those of their followers, tell the ongoing story of radical energies variously expressed and repressed. After reading them one comes away with a history of constant protest by the common man and woman against social, political and economic injustice. They inspire, for others on the left, a pride in the British radical tradition, along with a powerful and emotionally felt disappointment at its failure to overturn the established order. They show us a world where, for several centuries, the rich men made the laws and the clergy dazzled us with heaven and damned us into hell. And they make us wonder why a Paine, or indeed a Blake, in writing what they wrote, have left us merely with a John Major.

Inspiring as this history has been, it has its problems as a clear and coherent narrative, when we try to make

it so. And the current widely read histories of the eighteenth century offer quite different and alternative visions. Two such histories in particular, both written by students of J. H. Plumb, have set out to complicate the picture. John Brewer's *The Sinews of Power* has explained (inadvertently or otherwise) the non-event of a second English revolution by a sort of homage to British bureaucracy. Everything worked efficiently, and with at least reasonable justice, so that the massive financial burden of more or less constant warfare could be sustained without radical social upheaval. Where others have focused on the game laws, the hangings and the transportations, and the terrible effects of enclosure, Brewer describes the invention of a functional civil service. In a similar spirit, Linda Colley, in her recent *Britons: Forging the Nation*, sets out to argue that patriotism was not so much the last

refuge of scoundrels as the rational-choice affiliation of an emergent middle class seeking to elide its localist and class encumbrances by declaring allegiance to a common category of Britishness. Against Blake and Joyce, Colley's book manages to make no use of the pun on *forging*: her story is an affirmative one, in which more persons did well than lost out by the culture of patriotism.¹

So we are at an interesting crossroads, whether it prove a parting of the ways or a meeting point. The second seems likely, since Hill and Thompson have always been a little short on attention to ideology and mediation, the very categories that have proved obsessive to a "western Marxism" whose basic task is after all to explain why the revolution has not happened.² Thompson in particular, whose work is the most germane to any study of romanticism, has been taken to suggest that ideology and mediation were not very important in the history of radicalism's failures, that the common folk were not deceived at all about what they wanted and why they wanted it, and that repression alone was what stopped them. Thompson's famous chapter on Methodism offers a more nuanced account, and we should not simplify his great work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, as if it were entirely an example of his own later, passionately anti-Althusserian position in *The Poverty of Theory*. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference of emphasis between those who regard the British radical tradition as coherent and articulate and potentially able to have taken control, and kept down by sheer brute force, and those who would prefer to attribute the ongoing hegemony of the establishment to some failure of psycho-social integrity in the revolutionary classes themselves. We choose, then, between a genuine alternative that is overpowered, and an incoherent opposition that shoots itself in the foot.

It seems likely that neither of these narratives in its pure form—and I have of course simplified them for the sake

of expository clarity—is going to help us much in the elucidation of particular events in the history of British radicalism. But even as one preaches the virtues of a dogged historical localism—thick descriptions of small pieces of the general puzzle—a doubt creeps in: at least it does for me. For is not this eschewal of the master narrative itself now a merely routine embrace of the fashionable, postmodern history-making, one that seeks to avoid big mistakes by risking only small ones? And do not these local narratives themselves require some incorporation into larger (if not master) ones in order to claim some sort of context or meaning? Even a model of historical incoherence is such a narrative; it too is a general model of how things are (not) connected. Can history limit itself to an account of the contingent clash of ignorant platoons (there are no armies) by night, out of touch with a central command that does not exist? And if not, how then does it return to 'the big picture' without repeating all the Hegelian mistakes now made familiar by the skeptical attentions of feminist and postmodern historiographers?

This is not a question I can pretend to answer, so that I will not expect David Worrall's book, here to be reviewed, to provide a solution I cannot myself compose. But Worrall's book can be read as an interesting if at times unconscious instance of the problems that come along with writing history now. On the one hand, it is a highly localized history, built upon thick description, and a fascinating one at that. Following in the tradition of Hill, Thompson, Erdman, Goodwin, Cone, Margaret Jacob, McCalman, J. Anne Hone and others, its major task is simply to reveal what has for so long remained hidden: in this case, hidden largely in the Public Record Offices. Worrall succeeds admirably at this. He writes that he wants above all "to make this radical culture visible, to operate a recovery in the tradition so firmly established by feminist literary history" (3). This he certainly does, and his originality is largely the result of the

work he has done in the Home Office files and in other such places. His book has a refreshingly low percentage of citations from other people's books, and a correspondingly high incidence of "primary" sources. This gives his narrative the quality of strong verisimilitude, of writing about what happened, and in great detail. And this is hard to doubt, especially when we are told exactly and chillingly how individuals died on the scaffold: "Colonel Despard had not one struggle; twice he opened and clenched his hands together convulsively; he stirred no more . . . Broughton and Francis struggled violently for some moments . . . The executioner pulled their legs to put an end to their pain more speedily" (cited 57).

These passages take on moral and emotional power, especially when we are reminded that the case against Despard rested on six cards with printed oaths and a green silk umbrella (59). Worrall's book is rich in this kind of detail, which adds immeasurably to what we know of the lives of Thomas Spence, Thomas Evans, Marcus Despard, Thomas Preston, Allen Davenport, Arthur Thistlewood, Robert Wedderburn, E. J. Blandford, and others like them. The accounts of Spa Fields, Bartholomew Fair, Cato Street and Hopkins Street seem as good as eyewitnesses. The account of the Spencean "Free and Easies," where radical doctrine was shared in beer and song rather than in print, suggests a component of radical history that we may never recover fully. Worrall suggests a general drift toward "physical force" and away from the moderate radical movement (which, if true, has the effect of explaining the violence of the authorities at Peterloo), as he chronicles the evolution of Spencean ideology in the early nineteenth century—Christianized by Thomas Evans (157) and extinguished altogether with the arrests of Watson and Wedderburn in November, 1819 (187). In its wealth of detail, Worrall's book makes a major contribution to our sense—for it is not yet an understanding, and may never

be such—of the connections between the radicals of the 1640s and those of the 1790s. In this tradition, Thomas Spence has a major place.

But Worrall himself is not quite sure of the validity of the details he so loyally presents. His insecurity takes the form of initial skepticism followed by occasionally overambitious claims in the cause of "theory." He admits at the start that he has been "completely unable to avoid the central problem that much of my text has been produced by those who were doing the surveillance of the culture I report" (3). He further sees the "connected problem of the role of my narrativity: again, this has presented a problem which has seemed to me effectively insuperable" (4). One sympathizes with the decision to ignore these qualifications as soon as they are lodged, since to take them with complete seriousness might make it impossible to write this kind of book, which still seems to me very much worth writing. The second admission, that of his own narrativity, is one whose implications we need not pursue. Though they are of absolute importance, and are indeed the object of a great deal of state-of-the-art negotiation within the poststructuralist ethos, they need not be rehearsed here. The first admission, that the very accounts cited in the book as the basis of some sort of history are often the products of spies and other persons with clear personal investments in "discovering" criminal intent and lurid detail, is another matter. Worrall admits that he has made no attempt to decide what to believe and what to doubt; and in the present climate where all is narrative and all is open to some sort of doubt, one can see why. But then one wonders why the book pretends to be a narrative at all, and why it did not, instead, elect the format of an edition of records, with as much information as possible given about the authors of those records. This at least would have maintained a structural skepticism of the sort that is hard to hold on to in the present genre of the ripping yarn.

And yet, of course, there was a sequence and a story, and Worrall is in the prestigious company of the new historicists in giving us a story while holding back from specifying what kind of truth it might claim. At the same time some of his ambiguities are more open to specification or resolution, insofar as they are within the conventional framework of historical inquiry, assuming the possibility of that inquiry in the first place. Writing as he does about figures who have been deemed marginal or indeed ignored altogether, Worrall faces the problem of legitimization. This he hopes to accomplish with reference to a standard poststructuralist leveling principle, according to which there are "no soliloquies" (5) even for the most obscure figures:

It is not strictly necessary to prove the extent or the circulation of any ideology (which I think of as a readable formation of signs as texts), nor is it necessary to show that the performance of linguistic or other sign utterances is connected with other historical events involving human agency. Human agency is already in speech and writing which is already constructed as social . . . there are no discursively marginal figures in *Radical Culture*. (4)

This, I think, will not quite do. (And, to state the obvious, we are here facing something very germane to Blake studies). Of course language is already there, even as it is being modified, and of course any statement can have all sorts of effects in the culture within which it is created. But this is an argument about its potential, not its effect. To address effect we do have to deal with differences within discourse or between discourses, with ideology and mediation, with parts in relations to wholes, or bigger parts. To say that something is "already social" is to say nothing useful, unless one really does subscribe to a debased Foucauldian model of discourse (hardly Foucault's own) in which everything is always available to everybody, and everybody receives it. With this model, there are no problems for doing history: one just describes everything written or uttered as having the same status.

Worrall does not need to make an argument about effects in order to write his book, which could subsist perfectly well as an account of the records or as an account of statements and intentions, whether as narrative or as edition. But he has the habit of collapsing statements into effects, texts into acts, or of hypothesizing the one as the other. Spence's "political token coinage" may indeed be seen as an attempt to subvert the legal currency. But what does it mean to say that while the "sum total effect" of this effort was "negligible, the discursive implications are more far reaching?" (26). Whom did they reach, or not reach? And what exactly is "discourse" here? Ever since Foucault himself waffled on this word, others have rushed headlong into further wafflings, so that it seems reasonable to suggest that "discourse" is the word one uses precisely to *avoid* the more difficult and otherwise obligatory questions about history.³ Discourse, it seems, is the last affirmation of the postmodernist. To invoke it is to head off the abyss, so that we can still claim to be saying something.

There is an answer, of sorts, to the question of what kind of effect Spence's tokens might have had, or be having, and it is the one elected by the poets, who are not bound by the same conventions as the historians. Its principle is utopian, and/or anarchistic. All language is latent in future histories, and may as such be assumed available for future application and interpretation even if it is deemed marginal or redundant at its moment of origin. Shelley and Blake certainly proposed such a potential future for their own writings, well aware of their limited currency among their historical contemporaries. But Worrall does not resort to this hypothesis about relevance. He suggests instead that discourse *is* effect, at its moment of utterance or inscription. For him, "language is always transgressive," and revolutions occur when "language transgresses into another order of discourse, the discourse of action" (104). No matter that

this has happened so seldom in anyone's history; no matter that to call action "discourse" is to undermine all the other uses to which the same term is put throughout the book.

This conflation of discourse/language with effect leads to some odd claims at various points in the book—the points at which Worrall seeks most assertively to narrativize his materials. Hopkins Street Chapel becomes "a forum in which the discourse of the emergent could be grafted over the discourse of the dominant" (178). But where is the proof of emergence, and how was any dissenting rhetoric "dominant" to begin with? The discovery that some among the Panton Street regulars were either short or lame, or both, leads Worrall to wonder whether the radical clubs "may have been socially important for providing the opportunity for people with disabilities to fully realize their own potential" (36-37). He very much wants to contend that his writers were historically central, and had an effect. This is the anxiety that allows him to discover that Keats's 'To Autumn' is "saturated with the common ideology of its contemporary ultra-radical culture" (202). One does not have to believe that Keats's poem is apolitical—though many do—in order to wonder about the integrity of this claim. Mere references to fullness and ripeness are not enough to render the poem emblematic of the "unappropriated fertility of England's land" (202).

These remarks, and others like them, suggest that a little discourse theory can be a limiting thing. And because they are so often no more than remarks, they do not much distract from the conventional historical interest of Worrall's book. Moreover, in his account of the treason trials, Worrall himself is much shrewder about the relation between discourse and effect, word and act. He shows that the state's interest lay in seeking to prove what he himself elsewhere assumes: that words were deeds, or clear indicators of intentions. This assumed, men could be hanged in good conscience for what they said, regardless of how they

said it and who could have heard them. The defense, on the contrary, sought to distinguish between texts and acts/intentions. They maintained that "language addressed does not mean language arrived" (109). In the words of Arthur Seale, recorded at Watson's trial, "it is impossible to swear that a man heard, for a man may turn a deaf ear to what is read" (cited 109). Again, here is Despard's lawyer quoting Montesquieu: "Words do not constitute an overt act—they remain only in idea" (61). The trial debates are fascinating analogues to the debates, then and now, about the First Amendment in the United States. One might deduce from them, and remind David Worrall, that discourse also is not an act, and that much of the work of making history begins from that understanding.

While I am suspicious, then, of the means by which Spence and the others are rendered into historical significance by way of the appeal to discourse, I certainly share Worrall's regret (6-7) at the relative absence of a Spencean component to subsequent radical doctrines. As I have hinted, some of the same pressures and dilemmas attend Blake studies. Blake himself occupies only a few pages in this book. He appears in the context of the 1800 London Bread Riots as the poeticizer of radical handbills (43-47), and there is a brief account of his own sedition trial, described as exceptional in Sussex history (67-75). But if Blake's literal presence in the book is slight, he is everywhere by analogy. For is not the problem of Spence-in-history very like that of Blake-in-history? Is not Blake, in his attributed madness, his unrecognized genius, and his lack of immediate effect, very much the poetical equivalent of Spence? Blake, of course, had had his effects on the traditions of art and literature: on Palmer, Linnell, the Rossettis, Yeats, and so on, even before he was familiarized in the universities. But literary critics have still wondered and investigated what other effects he had or might have had besides those on the utopian imagina-

tions of poets, artists and scholars. We know there is a tradition created by Blake, but we are unsure of the place of that tradition in the wider historical world and the public sphere. Thomas Spence has not been even this lucky. While it is now unfashionable to invoke madness as any sufficient explanation of what Blake wrote, it is still possible to dismiss Spence as the author of "ineffectual half-crazed theorizings."⁴ Even E. P. Thompson, who seems to have missed very little, left Spence on the margins of his history of the English working class, as Worrall points out (6). If Thomas Spence and the Spenceans should yet have their day, it will be no little thanks to the researches of David Worrall and others like him. In these times and after recent histories it is good to be reminded of those like James Watson who stood up to protest a world in which "four Millions are overwhelmed with distress—while half a Million only are living in a state of splendid Luxury" (cited 100). Where now are our Watsons, our Spences, our Wedderburns, our Blakes?

¹ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992). I leave aside the other major alternative reading of the eighteenth century, the radically conservative story told by J. C. D. Clark. For a comprehensive account of Clark's work and the debate around it, see G. S. Rousseau, "Revisionist Polemics: J. C. D. Clark and the Collapse of Modernity in the Age of Johnson," in Paul Korshin, ed., *The Age of Johnson* (New York: AMS P, 1989) 2: 421-50.

² The phrase, and the argument, belong to Perry Anderson: see *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

³ On this matter, see my *Subject to History: Ideology, Class, Gender* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1991) 4.

⁴ Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt, A Life: From Winterslow to Frith Street* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989) 235.