

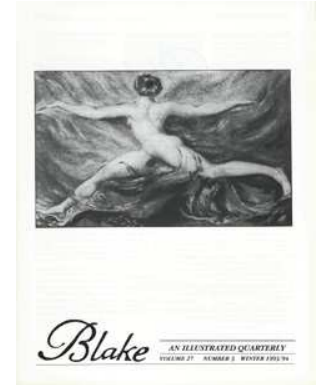
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R E V I E W

Stephen C. Behrendt, Reading William Blake

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manacles of defiance and ushers in a "system never before tried, one based on pure love and pure idea" (181).

Despite her breadth and erudition, Lewis's account of Shelleyan politics and power verges on the metaphysical. Ignoring the more seasoned work of Kenneth Neill Cameron and Carl Woodring, and avoiding Shelley's overtly political poems, Lewis ensnares herself in the trap of myth criticism, concluding that "political man" and "Promethean man" are ultimately distinct (190-91). Also, by eschewing "specific political allegory" for "broader notions of power" (12),

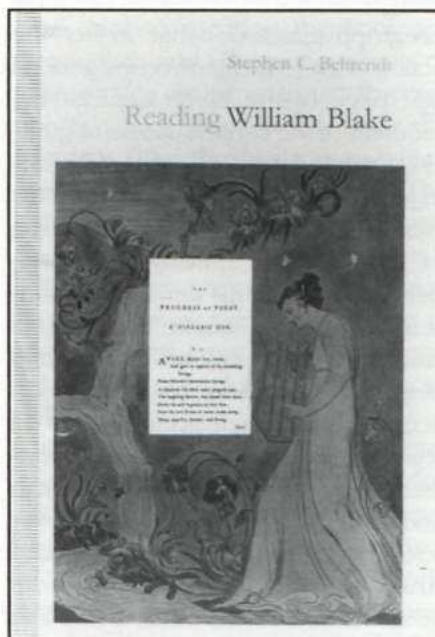
Lewis's intertextual analyses beg some fundamental questions. For example, how does "democracy" in late eighteenth-century London differ from its appearance in fifth-century BC Athens? What role does the French Revolution, or Enlightenment philosophy, play in Blake and Shelley's effort to "negate the God of Christianity"? How does the "post-Christian" cosmology that Shelley inherits stem from Blake's unorthodox yet decidedly Christian cosmos? Finally, how is the romantics' treatment of Prometheism an advance on Milton when they too opt for a "return to Eden" solution

to political power and rebellion? These questions require a more substantial historical theory than the archetypal method affords, one that can account for disparate social and political factors in the reproduction of a myth. While Lewis undoubtedly contributes to an understanding of the Promethean-Titan complex in western culture, her contribution neglects historical differences for mythological continuity. Succeeding in her quest for mythic coherence, Lewis uncritically ratifies the stubborn idealism currently under siege in Blake studies and literary theory.

Stephen C. Behrendt,
Reading William Blake.
New York: St. Martin's
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Reviewed by
Dennis M. Welch

This book explores the dynamics of the reading process involved in reading William Blake's illuminated poems, focusing specifically on "some of the demands" that his texts place on us by embodying "a fertile intersection among frequently differing . . . [artistic] systems of reference . . ." (viii). Following "A Note on Copies," in which Behrendt acknowledges multiple differences among various copies of the illuminated texts and proposes therefore to "deal only sparingly with these matters of variation" (xv), he includes six chapters: "Introduction: Reading Blake's Texts," "Songs of Innocence and of Experience," "Three Early Illuminated Works," "Lambeth Prophecies I: History of the World," "Lambeth Prophecies II: History of the Universe," and "Epic Art: Milton and Jerusalem."



The Introduction lays out primarily Behrendt's theory of Blake's perspective on readers and reading: his "works challenge . . . our assumptions and expectations about the authority of both narrator (and/or author) and text," requiring that we possess "both equilibrium and a good deal of self-assurance" and "serve as co-creators of the work under consideration" (1). Behrendt initially offers us the comforting assurance that "Blake does not *require* [although he 'encourages'] of his readers elaborate preparation" in order to read with feeling and intelligence what Behrendt calls

(via Wolfgang Iser) Blake's intertextual "metatexts." But if the poet-and-artist's aim is in fact "to liberate" us "from conventional ways of reading" (4), then *disequilibrium* seems to be a primary strategy for fostering such liberation. As Behrendt himself observes, Blake's texts are in a sense "non-authoritative" (5), tempting us to impose on them reductivist understanding. It is this temptation that helps to unsettle us and to transform our vision.

Citing Robert Adams's *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (1958) and Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (1979) and *The Open Work* (1989), Behrendt considers Blake's illuminated work "open" like the novels of Fielding and Sterne and the history painting of Benjamin West—open to countless interpretations, making "readers" take responsibility for them. While certainly democratic, this view is true only to a point. There is little doubt that Blake had strong convictions although he was open to change ("Expect poison from the standing water"). Indeed, the refusal in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* even "to converse with" the Angel "whose works are only Analytics" (pls. 9, 20; E 37, 42) implies that he was not always open-minded. Nor do I believe (despite my desires otherwise) that his texts and his expectations from readers are always open-minded. His

metaphor of conventional Bible readers reading "black" where he reads "white" (E524) implies to me that the line of his understanding and of being understood is firm and wiry. Behrendt seems almost to recognize this line when he refers (uncharacteristically and rather too extremely) to the readers' need to "affirm the existence . . . of absolute right and wrong, truth and falsehood" and to "read" and rebuild Jerusalem "properly" (148, 149). But perhaps he puts the matter more accurately by saying that Blake's iconographic (and, of course, poetic) signification does not drift "aimlessly in a sea of indeterminacy." Instead, it engages "in a form of intellectual sabotage that tests both the limits of his own art and the alertness and intellectual independence of his reader . . ." (37).

Like the emphasis on openness, the emphasis on independence may be put too heavily, however: "We must . . . learn to depend upon ourselves, and upon our own imaginative and experiential resources. For it is there, perhaps even more than in that remarkable artist's illuminated pages, that the real meaning . . . of Blake's poetry lies" (35). Yes and no. I become a little skeptical about a theory of reading that emphasizes self-sufficiency sometimes at the expense of interaction and interchange, especially since Blake was radically reformulating the eighteenth-century ideal of self-sufficient consciousness as conceptualized by one of his chief intellectual enemies—John Locke.¹ As implied in Behrendt's own language—"Blake expects [readers] to be paying attention" (37)—self-sufficiency without adequately hearing, seeing, and learning from what the texts say and show is utterly insufficient. Stanley Cavell argues that writers—in particular, the romantic poets—who want us to "imagine that which we know" make extraordinary demands on us as readers. They seek "to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change," or, as Michael Fischer puts it, "to prevent our substituting belief in

what they say for being touched or moved by it." The implication in this for our reading involves the idea of personal growth through interaction with the text, indeed a form of discipleship that is strenuous friendship with it. "Blake's model for the relationship between artist and audience is Jesus and his followers . . . (John 15:15-16)."²

Chapter 2 of Behrendt's book "explore[s] the contributions made by Blake and his individual reader to the process of reading" the *Songs* (41). Attempting to be "neither prescriptive nor proscriptive" in order to avoid "imputing . . . operations and observations that are in fact my own" (51), Behrendt proceeds nonetheless to a fairly prescriptive assertion that "in fact" the action of the male figure on the general title page of the *Songs* depicts "the moment of the consciousness of guilt" (52). While I tend to agree with this assertion, it is worth noting that this "real Fall of humanity" into the sense of guilt became apocalyptically evident to Blake in his era, for the consciousness that Locke and others associated with personal identity had deep and disturbing ties with moral accountability, self-accusation, and legalistic justice.³ Of course, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century puritan and evangelical views helped foster such consciousness. And as Jean Hagstrum observes, in dictionaries from 1662 on, "conscious" was defined as "inwardly guilty," "culpable," "self-convicted."⁴

Part of Behrendt's exploration of the process of reading the *Songs* involves his comparison of their multiple resonating voices to a kind of polyphony in which words and sounds interact to form another "metatext," not unlike that of the interaction of words and pictures. This comparison is evocative, but as happens often in verbal discussions of music it tends to remain somewhat abstract. Perhaps this is why Behrendt advises us to try to "imagine" the music of the *Songs*. But perhaps an even more helpful strategy might have been for him to

select three or four *Songs* that in most copies are adjacent to one another and discuss the various voices and tones that speak, or rather sing, those *Songs*.

Examining briefly but contextually *The Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, chapter 3 shows that "Blake plants the seeds of his subversion of reader expectations already in his early works" (73). After pointing out several ambiguities in the motto and first five lines of *Thel*, Behrendt says that such "calculated indeterminacy pervades not just . . . *Thel* but many of Blake's finest poems . . ." (80). Another example of such calculated indeterminacy that "forces . . . readers to construct yet a third text [a 'metatext'] that partakes of both the verbal and visual texts . . . but which is precisely coincident with neither" (89) is the frontispiece of *Visions* (in all copies but one). But while Behrendt offers an appropriately sympathetic view of Oothoon, who faces "enormous odds . . . in the male establishment" around her (90), he tends to follow the pattern of judging her performance as a success or failure when, I think, the whole thrust of the prophecy and her distinctly *unwoeful* rhetoric is to present a strenuous voice of resistance. Hence, he is disturbed by her "acceding to . . . male dominance and male-emulation" (90) when she asks, "How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?" (pl. 3.16, E 47)—a question which in context is ironic.⁵ Insisting that the faithless Theotormon look at her (pl. 3.15, E 47), Oothoon's wish to reflect him becomes a subtle but nonetheless critical form of resistance that uses his limited epistemological perspective against him. Because from his merely surface or sensory perspective she reflects his filthy ("mudded") image, then looking at her as defiled he should see who and what *he* really is. On the other hand, because she is in fact a "clear spring" (pl. 2.19, E 46) that cannot reflect the real Theotormon, he should by contrast to her still see who and

what he is—but only if he acknowledges his hypocrisy.

Placing three of Blake's most openly political prophecies (*America*, *Europe*, and *The Song of Los*) in the context of late eighteenth-century millenarianism, chapter 4 shows how he "marshals his verbal and visual forces to present for infernal reading a documentary history" of the era's millennial signs (105). Such signs are traced in the prophecies through two phenomena that challenge and influence the reading process—metamorphosis and encyclopedic allusion. For example, the notion of absolute space, whereby eighteenth-century science served to "bind the infinite" (*Europe* pl. 2.13, E 61), is both imaged and undermined by the dynamic and allusive aspects of the Urizenic creator and the huge coiling serpent on the frontispiece and the title page respectively in *Europe*. With these designs the reader's imagination is called upon to "discover and create something greater than what is represented . . ." (115). Similarly, absolute time is both represented and subverted in verses such as "The times are ended; shadows pass the morning gins to break . . ." (*America* pl. 8.2, E 54), where "Blake superimposes upon one another two very different conceptions of time, presenting us with the paradoxical situation in which metamorphosis is both continually progressing and already completed" (116). But for Behrendt to say that "Blake's texts supply verbal and visual commentaries on events and ideas whose ultimate specific location is in fact in the reader's consciousness" (120) seems something of an exaggeration, if not a contradictory misstatement, given the highly allusive nature of those texts.

Whereas chapter 4 discusses the more historical and topical "minor" prophecies (as mythological histories of the then-known world—Europe, America, Asia, and Africa), chapter 5 discusses the prophecies concerned with a "history of the universe that involves the events" of Genesis and Exodus (126). These prophecies are

The Book of Urizen, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*, in which Behrendt traces examples of inversion (such as the de-creation in *Urizen*), aimed at attacking authority and getting us to "read" our Bibles and our worlds in contrary and liberating ways. Inversion and reversal appear also in the "seemingly erratic organization" of plates in *Urizen*, implying as Behrendt says (citing Eco) "an assault on artistic structure" and on "received notions of reality" (135, 136). Although he appears to imply (as he did earlier) what these notions are when he says that the organization seeks "to liberate" the verbal text from "time and place," the received notions were probably those of absolute space and time—not to mention the Lockean, Newtonian, and Humean concepts of identity ("a solid without fluctuation"?), which turns out to be radically transient (like the horizon to which *Urizen's* name in Greek refers). The deletion of plate 4 in copies D, E, and G—eliminating the "solid" (pl. 4.11, E 71) that *Urizen* seeks for his self—may imply some of the discontinuity in identity that is based on memory and reason (or "consciousness," as Locke defined it).

Chapter 6 deals with Blake's epic art, specifically in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* and largely in the context of history painting. "*Milton* is . . . an interdisciplinary analogue to grand style eighteenth-century history painting . . . that directly engages artist, subject and audience in a community activity of consciousness-raising" (155). Returning from Eternity into space and time in order "to correct the errors in his own vision," Blake's *Milton* "offers the reader . . . the personal paradise of visionary insight that is the Miltonic-Blakean legacy" (156, 157). And the offer is made in the form of metatexts that readers must construct imaginatively from the visual, verbal, and allusive details of individual plates. Such readers, who are taxed even further by the linearity and simultaneity, the extensive allusiveness, and the multiple perspectivity in *Jerusalem*, are finally

said to be "ideal readers" (167)—self-sacrificing and forgiving, knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Reading William Blake is a well-documented book. The practice of referring to specific page and/or plate numbers of designs not included in it but in David Erdman's *Illuminated Blake*, Martin Butlin's *Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, and elsewhere is also very useful. There are, however, a few documentary citations that deserve to have been made. Given the interpretive problem of many differences among various copies of the illuminated texts, reference to the studies by Myra Glazer-Schotz and by her and Gerda Norvig would have been appropriate.⁶ Also deserving of reference is Graham Pechey's essay on *The Marriage*, one of the best on that work.⁷ Since Joseph Viscomi's excellent study of Blake's relief-etching technique supercedes Ruthven Todd's, John Wright's, and even Robert Essick's, it should have been mentioned in note 1 of Chapter 4 (184).⁸ Finally, Morris Eaves's discussion of Blake's audience is among the very best and in several ways complements Behrendt's.⁹

As with most good books, *Reading William Blake* includes some brief comments which one would like to see elaborated. These include but are not limited to: (1) the statement that the "complex polyphony" among the Songs "enables us . . . better to resolve the problems created . . . by Blake's decisions to alter" their "order" (21); (2) the tantalizing remark about "the enthusiasm with which Blake and . . . the radical Johnson circle must have responded to the substantial contemporary support" for Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (85); and (3) the briefly mentioned intertextualities between Ecclesiastes 12.5 and the motto of *Thel*, between the madonna-like figure of *Thel* in plate 5 and the figure of Constance in Fuseli's *Here I and Sorrows Sit* (180n8), and between the scenes in *Thel* plates 4 and 5 and the dynamics

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
David Simpson

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