

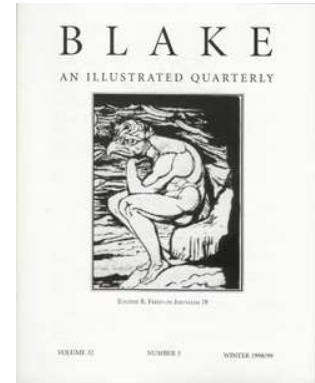
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R E V I E W

Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*

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Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*. Cambridge University Press, 1998. xviii + 250 pp. \$59.95.

Reviewed by MICHAEL FERBER

The opening gambit of Nicholas Williams's interesting book is uncharacteristically cute. He quotes Blake's denunciation of "Hirelings" in the "Preface" to *Milton*, those who would "for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War," and then claims that the "state of war" among Blake critics is a "war between the mental and corporeal themselves," the "mental" critics being those who take Blake in an ahistorical and aesthetic way as internally coherent, the "corporeal" critics being "socially oriented." This is, surely, to extend the meaning of "corporeal" so far as to turn it into its opposite, for what war could be more mental than this supposed war between university professors? I'm quite sure that David Erdman has never killed another Blake critic. Williams himself, though he enlists under the banner of the corporeal forces, is not, in the end, very interested in situating Blake in his real corporeal context—where he lived, how he made his living, whom he knew, what he read, and so on; Williams cares more about a more abstract, shall we say mental, realm of "analogues" that Blake may not always have known much about and seldom agreed with: the ideas of Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Burke, Paine, and Robert Owen. Williams, in other words, is less interested in Blake's own ideology and how his social situation may have prompted it than he is in Blake's *concept* of ideology, Blake's own view of how ideology arises and gets a grip on us. Rousseau and the four others are invoked mainly as parallels, sometimes as contrasts, to Blake's notions. The book is not ahistorical, but it is largely "high history of ideas," despite its occasional Marxist gestures. It is only half about Blake; the other half not only analyzes the five analogues but dwells at some length on such modern theorists of ideology as Mannheim, Ricoeur, Althusser, Bourdieu, and Habermas. The result is impressive in many ways. The book is nearly always lucid and unpretentious; it raises interesting questions; it often casts new light on the poems. If I found myself often quarreling with it, it is well worth quarreling with.

That the pairing of another writer with Blake on five different themes often yields interesting results, insights into poems that Williams is led to by looking at them through the lenses of the analogue texts, might seem to justify his approach, but I think these pairings are rather arbitrary. Owen in particular seems far-fetched as a parallel to *Jerusalem* as a utopia. That Owen's factory community in New Lanark was in operation at the same time Blake was working on *Jerusalem*, and that both men were concerned about

the miserable conditions of the working class under the dominant economic system—these would seem to offer little ground for comparison, especially since Williams does not even try to argue, as he does with the other writers, that Blake knew anything at all about Owen. A third supposed similarity seems conjured up out of a need to reply to the obvious objection that Owen actually got something going with real workers manufacturing real things: Williams says the utopian thinking of both of them "is characterized by its realization in the actual world," though he admits after this amazing claim that this actuality is "less immediately obvious" than the other parallels (171). Even confining ourselves to the five figures Williams invokes, moreover, I wonder why Paine's *Rights of Man* is set next to *Milton* rather than, say, *America* and *Europe*; instead, *America* is compared to Burke, *Europe* to Wollstonecraft. Would there be no better insights, and no more of them, if the analogues were shuffled about?

Chapter two, which I will discuss in some detail, invokes the parallel between Rousseau's *Émile* and Blake's *Songs*; *Émile* is a "cognate text for the *Songs*" (39). That certainly seems reasonable, if hardly original (Williams acknowledges Zachary Leader's discussion); despite Blake's later hostility to Rousseau there is good reason to think that among the rich cache of pungently phrased ideas in Rousseau there will be some that prompt a fresh look at the *Songs*, which is not only an ostensibly "educational" children's book but is often about children's education as well. With *Émile* as a source of ideas, Williams offers subtle revisions of familiar readings of several *Songs* as well as the title page to *Innocence*. His discussion of "The School Boy" draws from Rousseau's dislike of book learning; he assumes, on not very much evidence, that Blake shared it. He points out that the lines "Nor in my book can I take delight, / Nor sit in learnings bower, / Worn thro' with the dreary shower" are difficult, it being unclear if the "bower" refers to the classroom where the boy sits unhappily or to an extracurricular alternative where learning might be a delight. If one prefers the first reading (as I do), one must note the design, which seems to show a bowery playground: Williams reminds us of the child in the upper right, sitting in a tree branch and absorbed in a book. Good point.

Williams generally presses the differences between text and design. Taking a cue from Rousseau's dilemma over how a good education can be given when no tutor could have had one, he interprets "The Human Abstract" as an account of the continual and inescapable transmission of miseducation ("mystery"). Taking a cue from Althusser, he takes the design as making visible the ideology of the text, for where the text said there is no tree of mystery in nature, the design seems to show us one, or show us at least a "visible scene of bondage" (43)—from which indeed the old man at the bottom of the page may be freeing himself. This may misapply Althusser's idea somewhat, for I don't think he meant that pictures make visible the ideologies embed-

ded in texts, but if so it's an interesting misapplication. One might try it out on "The Tyger." The trouble is that Williams understates the active role of Cruelty in creating the tree of mystery—the tree doesn't arise from automatic self-replication—and it seems not to have occurred to him that the old man in the design may be Cruelty himself, knitting a snare.

The Rousseauian context becomes a procrustean bed, I think, for the "Introduction" to *Innocence*, tormenting it into the shape of a "tutorial" where the initiative comes from the pupil (child) rather than the tutor (piper); the child emerges at the end not as a stable, educated subject but a "joyous hearer/reader" able to act on his/her desires (57). This only seems surprising or interesting if you take the child as a pupil in the first place, rather than as a muse (somewhat like the man in Caedmon's dream who said "Caedmon, sing me something") or as a kind of emissary from the world of children who know what they want. Williams is more concerned, in any case, with the argument in Heather Glen and W. J. T. Mitchell about the "stain" and "hollow" pen, that the final lines, which immediately follow on the vanishing of the child, chart a descent from the immediacy and spontaneity of the oral and musical exchanges to the distance and artificiality of writing: "And I pluck'd a hollow reed. // And I made a rural pen, / And I stain'd the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear." If you take "stain" and "hollow" as having moral meanings you can convince yourself that something bad is going on at the end. (Williams might have cited Edward Said as having partly anticipated Glen and Mitchell in claiming that "stain'd" suggests a "troubling of innocence" in *Beginnings* [204], though Said thinks the piper writes on the water.) I've never liked this projection of sinister secondary meanings on what is manifestly, in my view, the innocent, even technical, uses of the words. (Is "stained" glass a bad thing in churches? Did not Blake stain things every day in his workshop?) It not only wrenches the poem into a new and weird direction that defeats its whole point, and undermines the mode of existence of the *Songs* itself, but it also misses the wit in having the same natural object that the shepherd uses for his pipe pressed into service as his pen (rather than plucking a swan); as pipe or pen, too, the reed had better be hollow. But rather than criticize Glen and Mitchell on these grounds Williams goes them one better, as if literary criticism can only make progress by dialectically absorbing and resituating previous stances. He thinks the "stain" fills the whole page, as the ink on Blake's page, and not only that: "The stain clearly seems related to the 'cloud' of the first stanza" (58). Several cloudy sentences later the stain and cloud are identified ("The stain or cloud"), and we are told that innocence is always already stained with experience, the work of miseducation is inevitable, and so on. A little later Williams suggests that not the *Songs* but their readings can be called innocent or experienced. I don't think the poems

are so malleable, but Williams in this case is certainly an "experienced," not to say jaundiced, reader. If all of us Blake critics have enlisted under a mental or a corporeal banner, then I must belong to some hybrid faction, the corporeal, history-oriented critics who think that Blake is sometimes simple and coherent.

Williams's third chapter uses Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a "looking glass" for *Visions and Europe* (74), and he offers interesting insights into both poems. I like what he says about Enitharmon's "female dream" in *Europe*, for instance, and why it is female (80 f). Another interesting discussion (though it leaves Wollstonecraft behind) concerns the notorious passage in *Visions* where Oothoon offers to catch girls for Theotormon in "silken nets and traps of adamant" and then watch them "In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon": here Oothoon offers a "redeemed vision of this fallen image" of nets and traps, revealing "the utopian content within the ideological form" (95). But even in this chapter I wonder about the ground of comparison. As Williams says, "The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft upon the work of William Blake has by now been invoked so frequently as to have become a critical truism" (74), but rather than question this influence, as this sentence seems to promise, he accepts it, and argues that "thus far critics have largely ignored the deeper similarities between the two" (75). It seems to me that what critics have really ignored are the profound differences between the two, and because Williams also ignores them his deeper similarities strike me as superficial. The most important of these, he says, is "their mutual discovery of the concept of ideology as a device for the critique and the explanation of their social situations" (75). Of course, as Williams acknowledges, neither of them used the word "ideology," but as a concept, loosely defined, it seems to have been widely current. Bacon's four "idols" might not have been remembered, but surely Rousseau's critique of Hobbes as projecting modern social relations onto the state of nature is a good example of ideology-critique. So is Burke's reduction of the French Revolution to the interests of the lawyers who brought it about, or Godwin's more general claim in *Political Justice* that some people "regard everything as natural and right that happens, however capriciously or for however short a time, to prevail in the society in which they live." I fail to see that having a critique of ideology especially distinguishes Blake and Wollstonecraft from many others, and even if it did, surely any discussion of it is misleading that does not take account of their immense differences. Williams acknowledges Wollstonecraft's associationism, for example, suggesting that "associationism might seem the most universal of all theories of ideology" (77), but he never notes that Blake critiqued *her* ideology in his many attacks against associationism as a woefully inadequate account of the mind, notably in *Visions* itself, so often claimed to be inspired by her.

The two governing concepts of Williams's book are in the title, ideology and utopia. Williams draws them from Mannheim's classic study *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) and secondarily from Ricoeur's recent *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. His discussion of the terms and their histories is well-informed but perhaps not fully considered; at least I found it misleading or puzzling at times. I don't think it is true, for instance, that Marx posited the "universality of ideology" at any time in his career (8), or assigned ideology to "consciousness *per se*" (9), but here I can only cite the standard works on the subject by Bhikhu Parekh and Jorge Larraín, which Williams does not mention. He rightly points out that the "Mannheim Paradox" haunts most formulations of the universal or global character of ideology—the *tu quoque* response that the critic of ideology must be no less contaminated by it—such as Althusser's; and he is right to cast doubt on Althusser's escape from the paradox by way of a supposedly scientific Marxism immune to ideological distortion (though that does not keep Williams from citing Althusser with apparent approval many more times in the book). Then he takes "utopia" as the opposite of "ideology," whereas I think it would make things much clearer to assign "utopia" to a third category and use "truth" as the opposite term. Surely the precondition of being an ideology is that it is, in part at least, false, and the first task of ideology-critique is to demonstrate its falsehood; then it may attribute its currency to the interests or distorting social position of those who believe it. This was Marx's view, as I understand it, and however well Marx's economic theories and predictions have stood up I see nothing wrong with this formulation. Marx, after all, thought that bourgeois economists understood economics very well; Smith and Ricardo were both scientific and ideological. He believed that science, reason, the dispassionate pursuit of truth provided a standpoint from which to criticize ideologies; he had a "strategic" concept of ideology, in Williams's terms, rather than a universalistic one (26). Williams wants to put both concepts into play at once, as he thinks Blake does, and so he resorts to "utopia": "What else is the import of utopianism but the realization that, if there really is no place from which to critique ideology, the ideology critic must position him/herself in the 'nowhere' of utopia?" (26). Yet I think he never convincingly explains just what this means or how one could do it. Simply to think up a utopia does not exempt one from ideological errors. Why cannot the same criteria (reason, justice, dispassionate examination of all the facts) apply both to existing ideologies and imaginary utopias? Williams cites Ricoeur as locating the strategic standpoint in the imagination: the power to imagine utopias in the mind is "the most formidable contestation of what is" (25). The imagination, of all Romantic places! But then the imagination is not "nowhere." The corporeal or Marxist questions immediately arise: Whose imagination? In how many minds? What conditions promote the utopian image? How can it gain purchase on the existing

social structures and change them? Who will oppose it? But these mundane and concrete questions seem less interesting to Williams than the paradox of universal ideology.

That paradox, according to Williams, pervades Blake's "London." "Blake's identification of the 'mind-forg'd manacles' is the equivalent of Mannheim's paradox, for it extends ideology even to the position of the poem's speaker, who can 'mark' weakness and woe in the faces which he meets but cannot perceive the mark of woe branded into his own consciousness," and even into that of the reader (19). Williams simply accepts the arguments of Heather Glen and David Punter without discussion, and without acknowledging subsequent criticisms of their interpretation, such as those in my essay (1981). He seems to think that courting the paradox makes the poem more powerful, whereas I think it makes the poem incoherent. The Mannheim paradox, which is a version of the Cretan paradox, explodes the logic of the poem: if the speaker's mind is also manacled, then perhaps he does not hear things truly, and if that is so then perhaps he is wrong about mind-forg'd manacles, and if that is so then perhaps he does hear things truly, and so on. But there is nothing in the phrase "mind-forg'd manacles" that requires us to impute them to the speaker, and there is every reason to exempt the speaker, who takes a visionary stance as if, like a prophet crying in the wilderness, he alone sees or hears the truth.

There are several places in Williams's book, in fact, where he fails to acknowledge previous discussion of the points he takes up. I don't want to be too hard on him, for I have cut a few corners myself at times in reading earlier scholarship, hoping that I have not missed something crucial, for life is short and so on, but it is a little frustrating to read an otherwise interesting comparison between Blake's utopian ideal of Eternal Conversation and Habermas's ideal speech situation (203) while knowing that Williams has himself failed to engage in conversation with certain predecessors, including, again, my own article which made just that comparison (1990). My book *The Social Vision of William Blake* (1985) goes over much of the same ground as Williams's book, though it is more about Blake's own ideology than his ideology-critique. In my introduction, for instance, I speak of synthesizing Frye and Erdman and I quote E. P. Thompson about placing Blake next to Marx together in his pantheon, in adjacent paragraphs; Williams begins his preface by invoking Frye and Erdman together and ends it by mentioning Thompson's pantheon with Blake and Marx. It's no big deal, but that and several other instances make me wonder if Williams has forgotten his encounter with my book, which he cites in general terms but never confronts. Other scholars might notice similar salient absences. Despite the absences, however, Williams's book deserves an attentive conversation of the sort I have tried to begin here.

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Wayne Glausser, *Locke and Blake: A Conversation Across the Eighteenth Century*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998. xi + 201pp. \$49.95.

Reviewed by TERENCE ALLAN HOAGWOOD

Despite its title, this is not a philosophical book;¹ instead, it is "a composite critical biography . . . neither continuous nor complete" (ix), narrating and discussing episodes for comparison. The incompleteness of the biographical accounts results in part from a shortage of evidence ("records are scarce from [Locke's] years in political exile" [3], and "neither man said much of anything about his mother" [13], but to a greater degree it results from a selectivity in favor of coincidence.

An introductory chapter states the book's aim to suggest a conversation between Locke and Blake, in imitative or

¹ For accounts of the philosophical issues that are important for a comparison of Locke with Blake, see Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton UP, 1947), which Glausser mentions briefly, and also two books which Glausser does not mention: Morton Paley, *Energy and Imagination* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1970); and Terence Allan Hoagwood, *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind* (Tuscaloosa, U of Alabama P, 1985).

rhetorical accordance with Locke's remark that "'Difference of Opinions in conversation' brings about 'the greatest Advantage of Society'" (3, quoting Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*). The second chapter affirms that "both [Locke and Blake] participated in conventional representations of gendered desire, yet both of them resisted traditional romantic plots and looked for alternatives to ordinary marriage" (12); this chapter narrates some of Locke's "amorous relationships" (15) and "Blake's feelings about conjugal love" (43) that involved challenging Locke's representation of the body. Chapter 4 shows that Locke condemned slavery and also "participated in the slave trade" (62), whereas Blake's opposition to slavery was not similarly contradictory. In chapter 5, the book explains that "both were accused of sedition" but "neither was convicted" (92). A chapter on the topic of possessions and theory of property proceeds by comparing the anger that each man expressed when he thought that someone had stolen a picture from him. Another chapter explains "Locke's immersion in print consciousness and Blake's reaction against it" (145). The concluding chapter compares Locke's epitaph (" . . . A scholar by training, he devoted his studies wholly to the pursuit of truth") with Blake's inscription in an autograph album (" . . . what is done without meaning is very different from that which a Man Does with his Thought & Mind"), and Glausser paraphrases: "artists try to create meaningful structures against the reign of 'Nature' and 'Chance,' full of hogs and humans, signifying nothing" (165).

Some of the research is primary, referring to Locke's papers that are now in the Bodleian Library, but most draws on familiar sources—e.g., Maurice Cranston's biography of Locke, E. S. DeBeer's edition of Locke's letters, and Bentley's *Blake Records*.² Some of the research and argumentation is both interesting and important—on, for example, the contradictions in Locke's responses (in writing and in his own financial investments) to slavery, and on Locke's involvement in the print trade, literally and in his development of print metaphors. Sometimes, however, the reliance on secondary research leads to problems, as it almost inevitably will: Glausser attributes to a personal letter written by Damaris Cudworth a passage about "an Active Sagacitie in the Soul whereby something being Hinted to Her she runs out into a More Cleare and large Conception," whereas that passage was written by Henry More, her father's fellow Cambridge Platonist; Damaris Cudworth is merely quoting.³

² Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957); E. S. DeBeer, *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976-83); G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); Bentley, *Blake Records Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

³ The sentence, from Henry More's *Antidote Against Atheism*, is both quoted and attributed to More in Hoagwood's *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind* 14.