

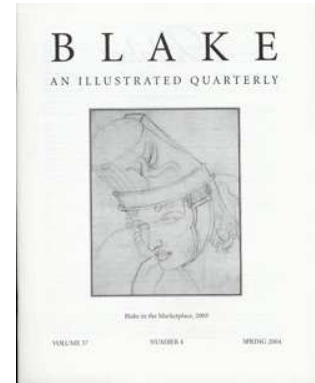
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R E V I E W

Subir Dhar, *Burning Bright: William Blake and the Poetry of Imagination*

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Subir Dhar. *Burning Bright: William Blake and the Poetry of Imagination*. Kolkata [Calcutta]: G. J. Book Society, 2001. 240 pp., hardcover.

Reviewed by DANIEL GUSTAV ANDERSON

In his monograph *Burning Bright*, Subir Dhar touches on virtually every text in the Blake canon, explicating many at length, and often leaning heavily on the now-classic scholarship of Northrop Frye, David Erdman, and S. Foster Damon. Dhar argues with vigor that

reason and imagination were facultative concepts that remained in Blake's attention throughout his long and active life as a litterateur, that the engagement (counteraction and confluence) between reason and imagination resulted in the creation of Blake's texts, and finally that there are three different and distinct stages in Blake's intellectual apprehension and literary reflection of the meanings of reason and imagination—an initial stage of unbridled enthusiasm for the imagination (seen as a transcendental faculty) ... ; a darker, pessimistic interregnum during which the imagination was regarded as fallen; and a final stage of a realization of both reason and imagination as redemptive potentia. (15)

He returns to the reason/imagination dichotomy with vehemence, often in every paragraph. Methodologically, Dhar divides his time between narrating the history of Blake's intellectual development largely by explicating his writings, and identifying Blake's place in intellectual history. While he puts forward a critical argument, then, he also tries at the same time to provide a kind of introduction to the mechanics of Blake's poems and preoccupations.

Explicating and contextualizing Blake's corpus in 203 pages plus notes, as Dhar attempts to do, necessitates foregrounding some material while backgrounding the rest. He emphasizes Blake's early texts such as *An Island in the Moon*, *Tiriell*, and *The Book of Thel*, since (according to Dhar) Morton Paley had not devoted enough attention to them in his 1970 study *Energy and the Imagination* (14), a text which, incidentally, argues a point very similar to Dhar's. Dhar asserts that in *An Island in the Moon*, "Blake was not so much interested in mocking individual members of a certain social circle as in satirizing the ratiocinative intellectual orientation of an entire society and age"; he then identifies by name the specific individuals in a certain social circle he thinks Blake had targeted allegorically (43). Dhar reads wordplay in this text with much care, including the instance of Blake's punning on John Locke's name: "The word 'Lock' with its range of eighteenth century meanings, including shutting up ... of fixing in position or regimentation, is the perfect exponential indicator of the limitations of the intellectual model" Blake most detested, "Urizen's 'Philosophy of the Five Senses'" (50). He points out

Blake's frustration with the limits of empiricism in *Tiriell* as well, "to which cause he attributed the increase in political repression, and the decay in religion and the arts that he saw round him" (74). Dhar also foregrounds texts seemingly most likely to be anthologized or familiar to an audience of non-specialists, particularly Blake's lyrics. He handles some, such as "The Tyger," at length, with a closer eye for useful detail than might be expected of such a brief study. Unfortunately, he gives only a limited treatment of *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, and almost no accounting of scholarship since the 1970's.

To contextualize his discussion of imagination in "the tradition of thought that was available" to Blake, Dhar includes a summary of imagination as a concept in the West beginning with Plato, "since no comprehensive philosophic or psychological analysis of the concept of imagination seems to have been attempted before Plato's time" (17). He assumes semantic continuity across historical time, assuring his reader that "As modern scholars have shown, the ideas of the Middle Ages were carried forth into the Renaissance" (25). Unfortunately, the breakneck pace in this chapter prevents him from treating contested positions—that in "the era of modern philosophy," beginning with Descartes, "the ghosts of alchemy, scholasticism, and metaphysical speculation were finally laid to rest" (32), for example—with any more rigor than the accepted ones: "Bacon and Shakespeare were men who straddled the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries" (31). The reader is forced to consider Dhar's unargued conviction that ideas arising from an etheric "temper" of a given age condition the shape and movement of material history (rather than the more typical deterministic assumption of the opposite), instead of Blake's place in a narrative of history.

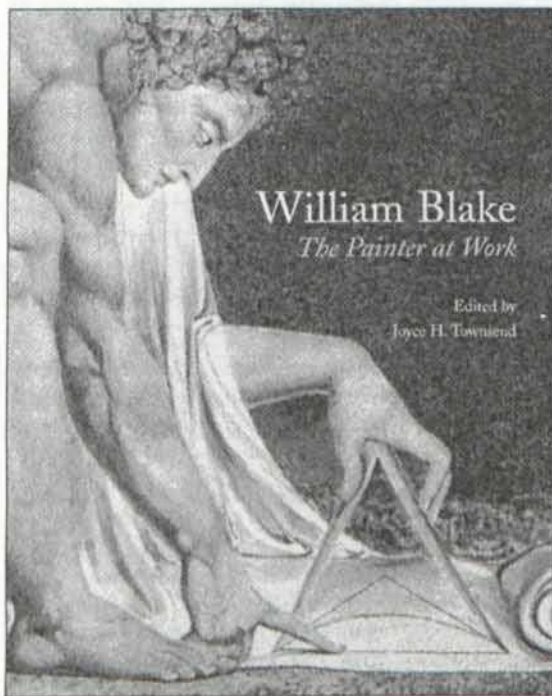
Dhar is at his most interesting and most relevant when he gives himself a breather from programmatically reasserting his thesis on reason and imagination. He contributes to the ongoing discussion of Blake's use of Indian sources (unfortunately citing twentieth-century translations rather than materials Blake may have himself read), and of useful comparisons between Blake's mythic vision and that of classical Sanskrit literature by comparing the fourfold vision of the later epics to the four states of being elaborated in terms of yogic consciousness in the *Mandukya Upanishad* (186, 229n41). Dhar's attempts at thinking radically at times lead to moments of real insight:

Blake ... was a man whose vision was always societal in the sense of being concerned, not with society viewed as an organism, but with the fates of the discrete individuals who constitute society in their congeneric identity. Blake believed that the condition of a state could be changed as the condition of an individual could be ameliorated—by way of imagination. (189)

It follows from this that the potential to change one's mind is a threat to the social structure brought about (according to

Dhar's Blake) by empiricism and rationalism. Dhar implies that Blake identifies rationalism as a means of oppression, but does not develop this idea. He misses some opportunities to elaborate his idea of Blake as a social critic; he cites Blake's criticism of those who abandon pity for the poor and hungry not as a critique of inhuman social conditions and their causes (including Urizenic thinking) as such, but only as a furthering of his project of proving rationalism to be a limited, self-interested abstraction Blake detested (95). Following Dhar, a scholar could take the logical step of connecting Blake's frustration with eighteenth-century social practice and his contempt for English discourse of abstraction as a Urizenic means of manipulating relationships of power.

Finally, Dhar's explications are remarkably subtle and precise; he is genuinely interested in showing how aspects of these poems work, particularly diction, and the tense and aspect of verbs, showing how in "Night" Blake's "shifts of tense merge into one another so that the total effect of the lyric is that of a vibrating present" (91). That he does not take the opportunity to discuss subordinate and ancillary aspects of his argument and its implications in closer detail or in a more rigorous sociomaterial context is disappointing.



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