

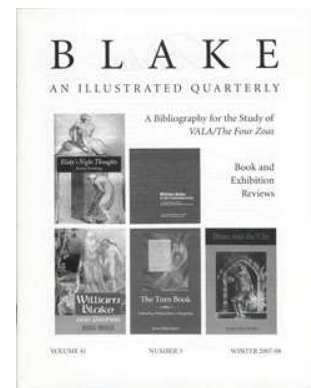
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R E V I E W

Jennifer Davis Michael, *Blake and the City*

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Jennifer Davis Michael. *Blake and the City*.
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Reviewed by Michael Ferber

THIS interesting and perceptive if somewhat uneven book repays careful reading. Its subject, the various cities Blake dwelled in and on (London, Jerusalem, Babylon, and Golgoonooza), is large and important enough to warrant a book-length study. It is attentive to details, accurate in paraphrasing, and lucid and unpretentious in manner. It interprets chastely, for the most part, keeping close to the texts: simply by collating two or three scattered passages it often illuminates them all. It is up to date with Blake scholarship, and courteously engages with it intermittently throughout. It could serve as an advanced introduction to Blake, for graduate students, say, beginning a serious study of him; indeed I think the chapter on *The Four Zoas* contains one of the clearest and most useful brief guides to that nine- or tenfold mess of a poem. The book also offers much of interest to scholars, both in little observations about individual passages or citations of historical contexts and in larger, if sometimes questionable, frameworks for conceiving whole works. It consistently grinds no particular theoretical ax, though it submits to the hegemony of "text"; it cites Bachelard and de Certeau a few times, but Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan are refreshingly absent, even as absent presences.

Michael's introduction canvasses Blake's uneasy place in the romantic canon, and distinguishes his view of nature from Wordsworth's. The contrast between natural and artificial, between rural and urban, is not found in Blake, she argues, because "all human environments are constructed, be they urban or rural, and the idea of a pristine nature does not even exist outside the human mind" (18). (I would have dropped "the idea of," for as it stands the second clause is tautological.) She does not distinguish between rural and wild, and so the unexceptionable claim that humans construct the rural environment leaks into the highly debatable claim that they construct nature. But of course Blake did not usually distinguish them either, as we see right from the start in the contradiction between the opening line of the "Introduction" to *Innocence* ("Piping down the valleys wild") and the frontispiece that shows a flock of sheep reconstructing the wild by removing the grass. "All that appears external," Michael says, "is for Blake internal" (16). This seems about right, but one substantial thread running through this book is "the physical city" (21), the real London, about which Michael comes up with some interesting data, new to me at least, and we may wonder how well this

gritty given London intersects with the idealist or constructed city. This is a deep problem in Blake, of course, not just for Michael. She seems to think Blake has worked it all out consistently, whereas I think Blake often conflates collective social construction (by "Albion," for instance) and individual idealist projection, even leaving aside his extreme claim that the not-human or "nature" is in the end only a projection of a fallen state of a human mind. In general, while she helpfully contrasts Blake's ideas with Wordsworth's, Swift's, or others', she seems to think within Blake's horizon of thought; he always has the last word. This sort of empathy or ventriloquism can be useful and encouraging, and I know how hard it is to resist sounding Blakean when one has devoted the time that it takes to feel capable of writing well about him, yet it tempts one to neglect or finesse his real difficulties and contradictions.

The conclusion of the introduction is a good summary of Blake's life in London, his eight residences and their neighborhoods, and how things were changing, "ever building, ever falling." Each of the four chapters that follow centers on a work and a theme or approach. The first deals with some of the *Songs* through a recasting of the pastoral mode into a kind of urban "communal space." It reminds us that there were quite a few parks, fields, and other open areas inside greater London, if not the City proper, so Blake did not have to escape London to enjoy some of the delights of rural life; the parks break down the country/city dichotomy. Nor does he distance himself from that life in his poems, which seem more intimate and engaged than both traditional, and Wordsworthian, pastoral. Michael thinks "Spring," "Laughing Song," and "Echoing Green" have an urban setting (47), though surely that is not something that was likely to occur to readers, even Londoners, familiar with the pastoral genre, and it is not clear what difference it makes in how we read each poem. More telling, I think, is her point that "Holy Thursday" of *Experience* seems to have both an urban setting, like its *Innocence* counterpart, and a rural one, with its invocation of "land" and "fields" and "thorns" (49). Anticipating her approach to *Jerusalem* in the final chapter, which she pursues with a vengeance, Michael argues that some late copies, with their "elaborate frames ... outside the designs," "draw attention to the created quality of this pastoral world" (40-41) within a city. Her comments on several of the poems are often subtle and well worth pondering, though occasionally I was left unconvinced. In the "Introduction," she writes, "the song appears to 'fall' from pure music to written text," though the shift "reverses itself" as the song is offered to every child (43). Why "fall"? Is this still the effect of Edward Said's mistake in *Beginnings* that "I stain'd the water clear" describes a fall, a metaphysical or spiritual stain, as if there were some purer way to make ink? She seems to want every conceivable meaning of "mark" to be operative in "London," including "make a mark," and allows the marks in both Ezekiel and Revelation to be part of the background of the poem, though I would have thought them mutually exclusive. But these are minor distractions from much that is rich and interesting.

Her second chapter, on *The Four Zoas*, moves, as she says, from pastoral to georgic, being concerned with labor, the aesthetic labor of building Golgonooza and the degraded or enslaved labor of building the real London in time of war. I found this the most satisfying chapter, though perhaps the least ambitious or experimental in approach, both because its theme is so central to the poem and because, as I said, it includes a helpful tour of the poem. Chapter 3 argues that in *Milton* the city appears more as an organism or body than as a construction of labor, while organic nature is described as works of art. It includes a brief history of organic metaphors for the city, mainly of the "body politic" sort, and some good remarks on just what "body" and "organic" mean in Blake's usage. The final chapter, on *Jerusalem*, dwells on the textuality of the city, and the difficulty of reading the multitude of signs in the real London as well as (and in much the same way as) in the composite text-and-designs of *Jerusalem*. It includes a longish discussion of what Wordsworth says about London in *The Prelude*.

Let me say in passing that, given the intractable problem of writing usefully about Blake's three long poems in fewer than 200 pages, Michael acquits herself surprisingly well. Neither the *Milton* nor the *Jerusalem* chapter deals much with the main plots (hard to discern in the latter, in any case) nor the themes of love, jealousy, self-sacrifice, and brotherhood; while at times I was thus left a little frustrated, I can appreciate that she wanted to avoid having to examine the whole tangled mass of interconnected plots and themes, which would have required another hundred pages and risked wearying the reader with predigested commonplaces or endless minute particulars. Among the themes central to these poems, the one she chooses, the city, opens a gate (to borrow the metaphor) that leads to many revealing vistas. She leaves it largely to us to reintegrate these vistas into the poems' larger structures and meanings.

In her final chapter, Michael claims that a city, a real city such as London, is a text: it must be "read," in order to understand some meaning within it ... and at the same time 'written' so as to create a meaning ..." (161). Whatever may be said for this idea, it is now rather a commonplace. Since *texte* arrived from France over 40 years ago it has colonized every department of humanities and social sciences. Everything has become a text. Everything must be read, and, since meaning is indefinitely displaced and postponed, everything must be reread, reinterpreted, and rewritten endlessly. The ideology, as Melville would say, of a sub-sub-librarian. Over 30 years ago Paul de Man pronounced that "All wars are texts," which led a group of Yale graduate students to pass out buttons saying "Veterans of Foreign Texts." But no mockery stopped the tsunami of textuality. In recent years, I think, the tide has receded, for it turns out that some things are not very much like texts after all, and even if they were, we would have to make distinctions among city-texts, landscape-texts, war-texts, and so on, and would soon be left about where we were before the flood.

Michael does not claim everything is a text, but in claiming that cities are texts she seems unaware of the history of "Theory" and its pretensions during the last 40 years, and to some of us who lived through them this innocence is a little annoying. Perhaps she has in mind a younger set of readers, who feel distant from all that, and will consider her metaphor (and more than metaphor) with fresh eyes. And it is true that cities are at least a little like texts, especially to a first-time tourist, and the comparison may strike illuminating sparks, as does her earlier comparison of the city to a body. With her usually steady attention to details, Michael is still a helpful guide, as when she discusses the four gates of Golgonooza or the relationship of the lyric "From Islington to Marybone" to the larger poem that contains it, but she plays this role less often in this chapter than in the earlier ones. She is after big concepts, and the biggest is the inverse of the city-as-text metaphor: Blake's *Jerusalem*, the text itself, is a city! (164). She is drawing from De Luca here, who likened *Jerusalem* to "a wall of words," but she goes much further, comparing streets and canals to lines of poetry, shores and walls to borders of pages, quarters or districts to chapters, junctions and crossings to the four prefaces, and landmarks to the full-page designs (167-68). That, certainly, is not banal; I found it rather brave and charming, though over the top. She doesn't do much with it, of course (how far could you take it?), content to let it widen our foreheads for a moment before moving on to other implications of the text taken as a city.

She wants to show that Blake imagines or conjures up a reader of *Jerusalem* who is rather like a large-minded visitor to a large city, baffled at first, but willing to explore and contemplate the labyrinth until it takes meaningful shape, whether revealed (read) or created (written), and becomes a habitable home while the visitor becomes a citizen. If we can learn to be such readers we will know how to "converse" with other citizens, entering each other's bosoms, and thereby continually rebuild the city. It is an attractive idea. It is Blake's utopian vision of Jerusalem, and hard to resist, but whether Blake embodied this vision somehow in the form of his poem is quite another matter. I have my doubts. I grant that a reader of *Jerusalem* with Michael's metaphor in mind might feel encouraged to plunge in, and I don't underestimate the value of that state of mind, but her argument in this final chapter remains more a pep talk than a Baedeker, and after a while even the most hopeful reader will need the latter. In my experience, even after many years of reading *Jerusalem* and excellent commentaries on it such as Morton Paley's, the walls of words remain discouraging barriers (we might call them wailing walls), the poetry is often clunky and clumsy, the narrative has little momentum or discernible direction, some passages are of adamantine obscurity, and the tone is often unpleasantly hectoring or jeremiading. Though some sectors of it are wondrous and inspiring, the whole thing, if it is a city, is Babylonish or Knossian. I'll revisit it from time to time, as I'll revisit Michael's interesting book, but I'll keep my Athenian passport.