

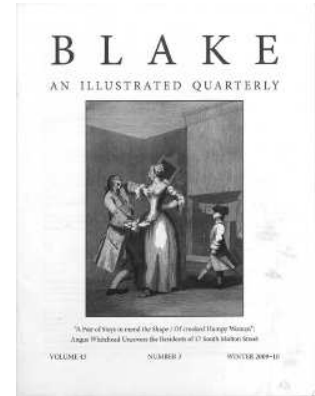
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Matthew J. A. Green, *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake: The Intersection of Enthusiasm and Empiricism*

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his marketing efforts he therefore adopted raillery, prophecy, and parody by turns as well.

The rivalry between the Chaucer pictures may have spurred Blake's exhibition, but rather than presenting only one picture, carrying it from town to town with expensive ballyhoo as Cromek had done, Blake instead brought together an assortment of sixteen works, many of them falling into subject categories popular at the time but rare in Blake's oeuvre. It's hard to tell how many besides the Chaucer picture were really for sale, since several had been borrowed from Thomas Butts, the "experiment Pictures" were probably not saleable, and *The Ancient Britons* was commissioned by William Owen Pughe. Some might have been throwaway parodies (especially *The Goats*), and others (*Pitt, Nelson*) may have been created for the occasion as Blake's ironic alternatives to such dead-celebrity art as Devis's *Nelson* or West's *Death of Wolfe*. *The Bramins* could have been a response to the popular genre depicting interactions between Britons and colonial subjects.

I am not sure that a fully coherent conception of the exhibition could have been communicated in room 8 by lining up an ideally suggestive array of contextual works or expanding the wall labels to include more of Blake's descriptions, but the new edition of Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* that accompanies the show does not go as far as it might have to help us either. This handsome quasi-catalogue by Martin Myrone, curator of the show, is for the most part intelligently executed but not very ambitious. Although the introductory chapter efficiently and even-handedly summarizes scholarly opinion about the 1809 exhibition and much more clearly explains its contexts than the 2009 exhibit itself does, there is little attempt to put it all together or go beyond what has been said about the pictures in Butlin's *Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*. The presentation of the complete text of Blake's catalogue is perfunctory, with informative but uneven notes, and the biographical and glossarial "indexes" at the back are mostly unhelpful and often mysterious. There are good images of the surviving pictures (including the Fogg's *Cain Fleeing*, which is not in the Tate show); several, especially *The Bard* and *Satan Calling*, appear to have been enhanced so that they reveal much more than can now be seen in the actual pictures.

Matthew J. A. Green. *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake: The Intersection of Enthusiasm and Empiricism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x + 218 pp. £52.00/\$95.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Nancy M. Goslee

A NUMBER of critics—Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, Wayne Glausser, Mary Lynn Johnson, Mark Lussier, Peter Otto, Stuart Peterfreund, and David Worrall among them—have begun to examine more carefully the received wisdom, wisdom abetted by some of Blake's own proclamations, that he absolutely rejects empiricism for imaginative vision. Others, notably Marsha Schuchard and Keri Davies, E. P. Thompson, and Jon Mee, have explored the historical contexts for his debt to enthusiasm and its religious sects. Green's study intrepidly takes on the task of showing how these two apparently inimical discourses intersect in Blake's early illuminated books and marginalia, arguing that he redefines "experience" by revising each discourse in terms of the other. As he explores these relationships between Enlightenment reasoning and religious intimations of the divine, Green works painstakingly through close readings of texts drawn from both sides of his primary opposition. His tracing of Blake's continued appropriation and transformation of these sources is illuminating, particularly as he repeatedly shows that the sources themselves often reveal the same contradictions between the material and the visionary, the empirical and the spiritual. Thus the project is both complex and important.

Yet even as a sympathetic reader I find myself irritated—or, better, intermittently frustrated—by two problems that appear tied to the strengths of Green's study. The first is that his choice to organize by pulling together passages from many works in order to examine a node or train of thought necessitates a number of transitions, and that these transitions are not always clearly tied to his main lines of argument. In fact, they seem at times visionary or poetic, as if they catch the contagion of Blake's sources, particularly the contagious metaphors of the enthusiasts, or of what Mee has termed Blake's own bricolage. Section headings and even chapter titles share this impulse, a very understandable one, but they cause some difficulty in following what is in fact a well-organized structure handling complex strands of sub-argument at every stage of its development. Perhaps that hackneyed technique of academic writing, the title or subtitle that moves from the poetic to the pedestrian, would have solved at least part of this problem. The second problem that challenges the reader even more than its intellectual difficulty warrants is that Green uses several of Derrida's later works as models for his argument—in itself a fine thing to do—but is confusingly oblique as he

brings in this post-structuralist mode of thinking. Of course, this too may be a sort of creative stylistic contagion from his source.

Instead of centering each stage of his argument upon a particular work by Blake—for example, moving from the early tractates to *Songs of Innocence to Thel* and so on through the *Urizen* books, the latest of the illuminated works he considers—Green chooses a more challenging topical organization, one ultimately better suited to his larger argument but perhaps less well suited for readers trying to locate themselves within the more familiar terrain of a known work of art. He moves from one thematic or philosophical point of “intersection” (9) between Blake’s works and those of his “friendly enemies,” whether empiricists or visionaries, to another such intersection.

Thus there are relatively few sustained readings of a given illuminated work, and critical points about a work may be scattered through different sections or different chapters. The phrase friendly enemies, Green explains, comes directly from a 2000 conference at Essex, *Friendly Enemies: Blake and the Enlightenment*, and indirectly from Derrida’s study *The Politics of Friendship* (1994, translated 1997)—both conference and study partly inspired by Blake’s relationship with William Hayley. The ambiguity of the phrase points to the difficult relationship between self and other that is central to Green’s book: the other may be Hayley or Locke or Boehme, or some aspect of their writings, or it may also be the divine. Although Green

doesn’t mention Levinas, that thinker’s influence, as mediated through Derrida, seems apparent throughout. His use of Derrida, central to the formation of his argument, is particularly crucial in framing his analyses of the divine. Yet a more explicit reflection upon how this theoretical framework relates to his carefully historicized project would have been helpful, particularly a consideration of the relationship between deconstructive critique and the late Derrida’s search for ethical and religious values.

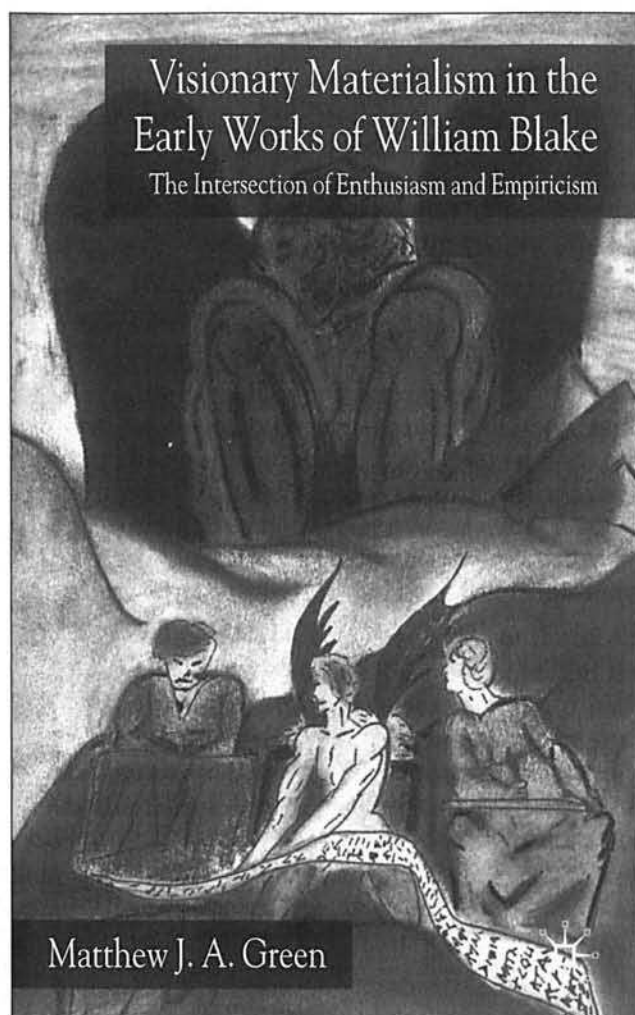
As Green’s introduction explains, chapters 1-4 explore a “shared experiential impulse” between Blake and both the visionary and the materialist strands of his “multifarious in-

heritance” (6). Beginning with the materialists, he then turns in chapter 3 to a fuller discussion of how the visionaries share this interest in experience. Chapters 5 and 6 examine how Blake borrows from scientific writing and yet transforms the terms into spiritual “doctrines and meanings” (6). Thus chapter 1 is primarily concerned with Locke, Priestley, and the problems of the cavered self (as described in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) as it attempts to relate to an outer world. Following Harry White, Green argues that Blake does not reject empirical thought but redeems it through a recognition of its capacity—if often neglected—for spiritual thought.

We should, then, read the praise of empirical thought in the tractates, especially in *No Natural Religion*, not as a set of assertions to be reduced to logical absurdity that would then prove the visionary alternative, but as a straightforward yet more inclusive definition of experience than that held by most empiricists. To reject empiricism totally, Green argues, “simply replaces one ratio for another” (14). Citing Otto’s Derridean or Levinasian assertion that Blake advocates an “openness to alterity ... the call of the other” (18, Green’s words), Green proposes that Blake grounds the relationship between self and other on greater openness than Locke’s definitions of selfhood allow, yet at the same time builds on Locke as just such an other to be encountered, challenged, and in part transformed. Rejecting neither body nor mind, Blake’s version of the cavered man acknowledges that “the quality of impenetrability” in the walls of the cavern “is im-

posed upon the body by his circumscribed perceptions, rather than inhering in the body itself” (33-34)—a statement that risks confusion as it poises perception between mental interpretation and bodily sense data. A very thoughtful analysis of Priestley’s similar attack upon dualism follows. Priestley’s own position Green describes as a sort of material pantheism, a pervasive and “localised presence” (37) of the divine.

Beginning with a fine reading of “The Human Abstract,” chapter 2 explores Blake’s critique of obscurity and mystery, particularly in representations of the divine. The empiricists he analyzes range from Locke through Burke, Priestley, and Hartley. In contrast to what he sees in chapter 1 as Blake’s



agreement with Priestley, Green argues that Priestley's appeal to the authority of an "Almighty Creator" leads Blake to diverge from him. As he works through discussions of the Poetic Genius of the tractates, Blake's annotations to Swedenborg's *Divine Love*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and a sustained reading—one of the few in the study—of *The Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Ahania* with its fatal tree, he argues for a materialism free from a transcendent mystery that would confirm its significance. Urizen as Enlightenment philosopher cannot integrate the fallen parts of himself and ends by imposing tyranny:

The empiricists, no less than their opponents, felt the need to contain science and in so doing they ensured that human knowledge could never actualise its redemptive potential: at the end of history, God would still be necessary to restore eternal harmony and to grant immortality to human beings. Blake believed the opposite: redemption could only be attained by human endeavour. ... It is the Poetic Genius which allows human inquiry to proceed from the known to the unknown and the fact that science has resulted in an acquisition of knowledge proves, for Blake, that this Genius exists. (68-69)

Green then follows with an extremely lucid discussion of whether this Genius as deity is contained within all men or is transcendent or is somehow both. He suggests that this ambiguity

may ... reflect Blake's unwillingness to fall into another dichotomous trap. Arguing that every man is God removes the need for otherness and seems to not only justify, but also promote the retreat into the self which Blake found so repugnant in Locke. On the other hand, emphasising otherness too much would result in the abstraction of divinity which Blake regarded as such a dangerous element in orthodox religion. (69)

Instead, Blake may have "envisioned divine power as constituted by the interaction of self and other" (69). Hence his use of giant forms, mythical human figures to embody this interaction and to make it visible, removing mystery and creating "Eternal Delight" (*Marriage* 4, E 34).

Chapter 3, "Right Reason and 'Sense Supernaturall,'" broaches Blake's intersections with the visionary enthusiasts as they debate Hobbes over the nature of the body. Pointing to the experiential, materialist elements in Boehme, Muggleton, and the Moravians, and to striking affinities across the empirical/visionary divide, especially between Hobbes and the Muggletonians, Green analyzes relationships between seeing and being seen by God and by more earthly others. "The post-enlightenment stance that Blake shares with Derrida," Green writes, especially

his sense of the self's relation to an absolute other who is every other ... develops out of a pre-enlightenment inheritance that promotes the opening of mystery and the accessibility

of the divine gaze. ... In the alternative genealogy of an open mystery, the other is within reach: the seeing, hearing and holding are reciprocated by the human self, even as it is overwhelmed by brilliance and magnanimity and even though the other always remains changeable, capable of surprise (81)

Not only does he argue for the "onto-theological grounding of Lockean empiricism," but he also finds an "empirical impulse in anti-rational sects which stretches beyond the Muggletonians, through the ... Ranters, and finds its way into the eighteenth-century theosophy of ... the Moravians, ... Swedenborg and Richard Brothers" (88). For example, Muggleton bases salvation in the vision of "the body of God," a "corporeal ... human body" (89-90, Green's words). At the end of the chapter, Green analyzes the contraries in *Marriage* as revisions of both Boehme and Priestley, both the former's alchemical union of light and heat, good and evil, and the latter's particle theories of attraction and repulsion. Cautiously pointing out that Blake may not have deliberately intended to mesh these disparate approaches, Green nevertheless argues that Blake is "able to situate" (99) himself within such binaries.

In chapter 4, "The Opening Eye," Green pursues the political implications of his topic by placing the revolutionary sexuality of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in the context of Swedenborgian debates about and Moravian practices of a divine sexuality that is embodied in Christ's relationship to his human worshipers and also in his worshipers' own sexual relationships. Here he builds on the research of Schuchard and Davies that traces Blake's parents' connections to the Moravians and to their "obsessively graphic depictions of Jesus' battered body, with glorification of his circumcised penis and vaginal side-wound" (Green 102, quoting Schuchard and Davies). Fascinating as this connection is, most of the chapter explores Blake's complex relationships with Swedenborg, as Green carefully traces through Blake's annotations a mix of approval and disapproval, the latter—he suggests—linked to the political events of the French Revolution. His discussion of Swedenborg's breaking away from the radical politics of continental masonic lodges seems, however, a bit truncated, perhaps as a result of cutting without reinserting some transitional material. His concluding discussion of Richard Brothers, building on work by Morton Paley and Mee, defines itself by emphasizing the "primacy of experience, ... the importance of expanding or altering perception and ... the conjunction between the divine and the human ... the visibilizing of the invisible other, the becoming public of the sacred secret" (129).

Chapter 5, "The Ark of God," takes off from an annotation to Lavater's *Aphorisms* in which Blake proclaims that "man is either the ark of God or a phantom of the earth & of the water" (533, E 596). Green then explores

questions of human nature, sexuality, bodily existence and, without perhaps taking things too far, the interiorisation of divine light ... questions not only about the relationship be-

tween law and desire, but also about the limitations of sexuality, the dangers of perception, and the extent to which the self can or should open itself to the interpenetration of the other. (133-34)

A discussion of *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* tests the alternatives for defining "man" that Blake's annotation to Lavater suggests: Green conducts a close examination of these emblematic plates, finding in them both the affirmative aphorism from *Marriage* that "every thing that lives is Holy" and the bleaker view of "life's capacity for living on death" (137). Nevertheless, he argues, that capacity proves liberating, an escape from or at least a passive resistance to Urizen's "iron laws" (E 81).

A reading of plate 11 of *Marriage*, however, suggests "an anxiety over the actual potential of the Poetic Genius to liberate" us from "cultural and political subjection" (139). Turning to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Green then argues that Oothoon's self-sacrifice to Theotormon's eagles leads toward "a particular understanding of the relationship between suffering and prophecy, between distress and the human experience of the divine" (145). He does admit a few pages later that "somewhat distressingly, the unfolding of *Visions* would seem to suggest that it is through the horror of suffering ... that insight into the heart of the deity can be achieved"—a link between "sexual exploitation and a Promethean politics" (147). If Oothoon is the Promethean figure who resists suffering for human liberty, then how does her willing self-sacrifice work here? Is she a Christ-like scapegoat? Is she compromised by that acceptance of suffering? Does she change her mind in the course of the poem, resisting Urizen far more openly in her final monologue? While Green's reading does have some intriguing affinities with recent discussions of Shelley's Prometheus and the question of his submission to suffering, the discussion is simply too condensed to satisfy the questions of a critic immersed in feminist readings of the work. Instead of discussing Oothoon's attack upon Urizen, which would seem relevant to his discussions of the divine, Green turns back to the "Marygold" (E 45) that she plucks before beginning her dangerous journey toward Theotormon. Following Worral's suggestion that scientific reports of emitted light from the flower can be linked to spiritual vision, Green argues that Oothoon's conversation with the marigold perceived as nymph moves beyond the limits of science (for Darwin acknowledges that he cannot fully explain that strange light emitted from the flower) into a redemptive vision that images an eroticized divine love. I am still puzzled, though, about how that potential of divine love is realized—or, rather, tested—in the narrative that follows. When Green turns to "the illumination of the final plate" (152), he describes Oothoon wrapped in flames and hovering above the daughters of Albion. While I agree that this may be a visual image of her hope to enlist us in her prophetic vision, Green doesn't note that in some copies the flames are blue-green waves. Nor does he note the interpretative problem posed by the occasional migration of the dark,

static frontispiece to the final plate, a migration that points toward a more pessimistic reading.

A section on the bounding line moves from the graphic toward an exploration of the boundaries between self and other. Following Joseph Viscomi's and other critics' observations that Blake relates artistic and sexual energies, Green adapts Edward Larrissy's claim that a "concern over sexual possessiveness" reflects "an anxiety about form and structure in general" (154, Green's words) to argue that "the relation between artist and medium is intimately connected with the relation between self and other" (155)—and thus to Blake's overarching theme of the divine found in the relationship between self and other. "Sexual possessiveness, the drive to bring the other into oneself," Green writes, "is the very impulse that opens the self to alterity, that renders it hospitable toward the other" (154). This wording is still disturbing, given the rape in *Visions*, and seems to distort Larrissy's point about Blake's "concern." He goes on, however, to use less aggressive phrasing and to demonstrate the significance of his argument. Citing Blake's December 1795 letter to George Cumberland discussing the relationship among invention, execution, and inspiration, Green explains that the "embrace of alterity in the process of artistic embodiment is meaningfully connected to the idea of the bounding line as well as to Blake's understanding of the self open to redemption, particularly as this relates to the closeted self described by Locke" (156). He then tests this point against Locke's theories of invention, judgment, and genius in *Thoughts Concerning Education* as well as *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to explore issues raised by Locke and later materialists about the invasive, contagious effect of ideas from outside the self, ideas that transform the self's perception and subject it to imprisoning, external moral systems. *The Book of Urizen*, he concludes, dramatizes this problem. A final section of this complex chapter explores further the paradox that in Blake's visionary materialism "absolute interiority ... corresponds with a sense of the self's thoroughgoing permeation by the other, a loving and erotically charged intercourse with the divine that occurs even when the self remains unaware" (163). Thus he returns to the Moravians' theology—and also to Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* and to a complex discussion of law, love, and judgment of others—and hence, by way of Lavater's aphorisms and theories of physiognomy, back to the visual perception of others. He then goes back to Cumberland's praise of Blake in *Thoughts on Outline* and develops further the idea of outline as a penetrable barrier between self and an other that may be either human or divine. This sequence, even more dizzying than my summary suggests, leads to a reading of

the bounding line as an expression of energetic identity rather than as an impediment to interaction and conversation. Therefore, in drawing, both executed and perceived, the barrier is allowed to become the bearer and the expression of identity is united with the differentiation of one self from another. (170)

In his concluding chapter, "The Sublime Act," Green shifts focus slightly to extend the relationship between essential self and the "external form" (171) of that self by developing Viscomi's point that Lavater's *Aphorisms* and Blake's notes to them generate the early tractate *All Religions are One*. Green's glosses of Blake's glosses show that Blake reverses Spinoza's priority of divine substance over particular essences; Blake "implies a redefinition of substance as the manifestation of essence—as the ascription of a visible quality, a 'tincture,' to the essence," leading to "a public expression of identity" (172). "Tincture" is an artistic term for color yet also a mystical term drawn from Boehme. In making this link, Blake

is infusing his discussion of artistic and human forms with the idea of a divine fire or energy. Thus, in giving tincture to the accident, the substance effectively redeems the self's relationship with the other, transforming arbitrary imposition into a conflict or convergence of distinct and eternal identities. (173)

In the tractates, Green argues, the "Poetic Genius ... operates as the nexus linking the universal essence that drives creation with the individual identities that it creates." In the process by which God "becomes as we are" (E 3), "the universal genius becomes possessed by each individual manifestation. ... Thus, the traits of the individual are transferred onto the universal impetus of creation, effecting a mediation between the universal and the personal" (176-77). This is a fine supplement to his earlier discussions of the Poetic Genius.

In a rich glossing of the Proverb of Hell, "The most sublime act is to set another before you," Green moves from the most obvious meaning, "giving deference to the other," to a reading based on a response to the visual. He turns the visually dangerous process of "becoming what [the observer] beholds," seeing the other placed in front of the subject, into a process of subjecting the self to "infiltration to the potential of interpenetration, of love" (177), and thus to an "influx of the divine" (178). Again, recalling Oothoon, I'm a little nervous about Green's syntax equating interpenetration with love as he shifts from human relationships to human/divine relationships. Still a third shade of meaning, however, points toward a political and religious substitution of the other for the self, leaving the other to bear the brunt of public criticism, to become a scapegoat or sacrifice. Here Green's reading might be further developed in terms of Kenneth Burke's theories of scapegoating—as Laura Rutland has argued in an unpublished dissertation.¹ As Green links the crucifixion to more recent scapegoating in the Terror, he returns to Derrida's Levinas-influenced argument that friendship is non-reciprocal, asymmetrical. Thus, he writes, "Christ as the example *par excellence* of the divine other shatters the foundations of cavered man, of the Lock-

ean self from which we ourselves today continue to inherit" (179).

When Green turns back to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to set up his conclusion, I think he misreads Isaiah and Ezekiel by suggesting that they support the "cultural subjugation" of submitting to the "jews code" (E 39) (182-83), but his larger point, as he criticizes Nicholas Williams's reading, is one to weigh seriously: *Marriage*, and Blake's early work more broadly, possess an "underlying spiritual basis" that is not totalizing, because Blake makes room for "variety in the generation of identity" (184). Finally,

it is the interplay between substance and accident, variety and unity, that allows for the expression of personal genius. ... It is the lusts and appetites of the human body, which from an angelic or Urizenic perspective are marks of frailty and imperfection, that give shape to human identity and facilitates [sic] both the interiorisation and the public expression of that light which is love, by inducing us to seek something beyond the "shadows of [our] curtains" (*Visions*, 7.7; E50). (189-90)

Although some of the difficulties presented by Green's book might have been avoided by clearer transitions and signals, many others are intrinsic to the very difficult intersections he traces, and thus the struggle to understand his study is well worth the time. Moreover, if his analyses of the relationships between self and other run into problems when one tries to read them in terms of gender differences, these problems may be a result of his highly abstract Derridean/Levinasian argument that relationships with the other, whether human or divine, may all be spoken of in the same way and may all share the same lack of symmetry. In other words, this may be the reader's problem with Green's theoretical model, and not entirely with his use of it. Still, a book so focused on sexuality in early Blake might acknowledge the difficulties that model generates once it is applied to works that have been read so productively from feminist viewpoints.

1. "Hindrance, Act, and the Scapegoat: William Blake, Kenneth Burke, and the Rhetoric of Order," diss., University of Tennessee, 2003.