BOOK REVIEWS


The title of Matthew J. A. Green’s book also announces its argument: Blake’s early work weaves together the discourses of empiricism and enthusiasm, or materialism and spiritual vision, or, at a higher level of abstraction, enlightenment and counter-enlightenment. As Green recognizes in his efficient introduction, if this claim is correct it is one more nail in the coffin of the venerable Enlightenment vs Romanticism opposition. Thus Green’s Blake is not Locke’s great opponent, nor a natural supernaturalist, nor a member of the visionary company. If he is a romantic at all, he is one for our own time—a chastened, dialectical reader of his own enlightenment heritage, who understands the value of empiricism and resists, avant la lettre, the temptations of idealism and romantic ideology.

Green’s first chapter, on empiricism, sets itself the task of showing that Blake’s attacks on Locke, Bacon and Newton are not what they seem. Locke, in particular, emerges as a “friendly enemy,” a paradoxical formulation here given a Derridean spin. (Green’s penchant for Derridean references becomes less palatable as the book proceeds.) In this reading, Locke is not unlike the Milton who emerges in Blake’s later writing, an antagonistic freedom fighter who has been tamed and domesticated over the course of the eighteenth century—and whose spirit must therefore be redeemed and set loose once again.

Joseph Priestley, whose materialism emerges toward the end of this first chapter as a possible example of such liberated empiricism, continues to provide a model in Green’s second chapter, which treats Blake’s critique of institutionalized Christianity and state power. The link to Priestley is an important one, for if it holds it would allow Green to dispense with the familiar picture of Blake as an anti-science, anti-enlightenment writer. And the comparison does hold, in part. Green is right that Priestley, like Blake, is an antidualist and a powerful critic of the Anglican establishment. But because he links Blake and Priestley largely through a shared set of ideas, he tends to downplay their cultural and historical differences. In particular, he misses the fact that Priestley, though a dissenter, was also a solidly middle-class, institution-building friend of prominent industrialists. Not all critiques of the corruptions of Christianity mean the same thing or have the same effect, but in Green’s hands it seems that they do. In this regard his historicism is quite thin; his interest is really in an earlier version of the history of ideas, dressed up in the more current language of “cultural context” (3).

This lack of clarity about exactly what historical story is getting told remains a problem throughout the book. Is it a study of influence? A genealogy? A cultural history? A discussion of relatively free-floating ideas? For example, if we agree with Green that continued critical vigilance against romantic idealism remains necessary, there still remains the question of how to narrate the relationship of enlightenment to counter-enlightenment. Sometimes, in this book, they are “interwoven” (1), sometimes they “intersect” (as in the book’s title), and sometimes they “converge” (2). Each of these verbs puts the agency in a slightly different
Aware of how unBlakean the notion of redemptive suffering is, Green turns to Erasmus Darwin as an example of a non-Urizenic science—a tool of liberation not oppression. Though this requires that we forget the argument about redemptive suffering, it is an interesting move, perhaps the most satisfying of the book. In the second half of this chapter, Green goes on to develop a reading of Blake’s “bounding line” as an effort to theorize a self “open to alterity,” in contrast to the “closeted self described by Locke” (156). Outline, he argues, is designed as an expression of the Poetic Genius, hence open to newness even though it is itself distinguished from its environment.

The emphasis on the interpersonal, relational body, as well as the relationship between a body’s inner essence and outer form, continues in the book’s final chapter. Green offers a nice reading of Blake’s phrase “The most sublime act is to set the other before you” as not only opening oneself to possible reciprocal influence and love of the other but also, in more politically fraught circumstances, suggesting a logic of substitution or scapegoating whose archetypal example is Christ, and in which friendship or love is by definition non-reciprocal and excessive. The chapter then concludes with a meditation on the relationship between Blake and postmodernity. This would have been a terrific place to justify the book’s reliance on Derrida, but Green passes up the opportunity.

Though its final two chapters are certainly its best, I nevertheless read this book with disappointment. “Disappointment” is the right word, because with a slightly different emphasis it could have been a real winner. Green is playing with large, important themes, and he does not seem fully aware of their implications. For example, he is surely right to note that we have overplayed the Enlightenment/Romanticism distinction—in no small part thanks to Blake himself. But for a decade and more the pendulum has been swinging back the other way, and so it is less immediately clear that Green is giving us the “radical new reading” that his book jacket promises. Indeed, the Blake that emerges in this study seems familiar. Here Blake joins a panoply of late eighteenth century writers, committed to enlightenment but equally committed to reading it against the grain, extracting like the deists before them the seams of enchantment and enthusiasm that run through Locke and Newton. As Green rightly acknowledges, the late eighteenth century was awash in enthusiastic empiricism and visionary materialism, its intellectual influences massive, confused, and contradictory. But Green’s use of this material is not up to the level of similar books by E.P. Thompson, Jon Mee, or Saree Makdisi.

What Green could have a given us, then, is a more ambitious study that uses Blake as a base for considering romantic culture’s relationship to modernity—a big, abstract, task that has been buried, in recent decades, by a welter of undertheorized historicizing studies. What is right about Green’s Blake, it seems to me, is what he tries to capture in the phrase “Visionary Materialism.” He could have been more explicit about this, but I take it that his point is that the phrase only appears paradoxical after we have accepted the distinction between reason and faith. “[D]ichotomies such as those between the rational and the irrational,” Green writes in possibly the single best paragraph of the book, “are far less rigid than has often been supposed” (99). This particular division is an invention of the early modern period, and almost immediately it produced opponents: those deists, ranters, and enthusiasts whose mediated influence Blake felt many years later. For these thinkers, the experience of God or of the divine was not anti-empirical or irrational but rather part of a texture of everyday, material, experience that was in fact threatened by the developing and eventually dominant division of knowledge accomplished by what we usually term the scientific revolution.

Yet in recent years it has become overwhelmingly clear, if it was not before, that the Enlightenment was not singular but multiple: radical, conservative, secular, religious, scientific, occult, Anglican, dissenting, skeptical, and so on. It remains easy, of course, to
hypostatize the term, something that Green to his great credit does not do. I only wish he had gone further in this regard, and given up on the language of counter-enlightenment altogether. In their better moments even Newton and Locke, not to mention John Toland and William Blake and a host of others, recognized that one possible extension of the scientific revolution was a world of brute nature and soulless, atomized individuals. This recognition is not the property of Blake or of romanticism or of the counter-enlightenment but of modernity itself, in all its diversity and ambiguity.

Once enlightenment has become multiple, then Blake’s work, and romanticism more generally, can no longer be pitched as simply a progressive, humanizing response to soul-destroying reason, nor can it be dismissed as a reactionary anti-modernism. Blake is too-easily anchored to one or the other of these categories, and the usefulness of Green’s book is to set him adrift again. But to really understand the continuing appeal of such bicameral thinking, we would need to historicize not just Blake but the history of romantic criticism itself. It matters, surely, that Frye and Abrams and others writing in the aftermath of World War II constructed a romanticism that delivered us from the enlightenment. Green, along with other current scholars of romanticism, wants to introduce us to the enlightenment once again, and gently scold us for having left it. What is it about our own cultural moment, rife with religious violence and enthusiastic rhetoric, that makes us want to return to an enlightenment capacious enough to make a place for even such an odd fellow as William Blake?

References

Colin Jager
Rutgers University
E-mail: colin.jager@gmail.com
© 2008 Colin Jager


For students of William Blake’s work this book is important for two reasons: first, we want to know about Blake’s work after the monumental Jerusalem, which has sometimes been seen as Blake’s valedictory work; second, we want to know what Morton Paley has to say about Blake’s work after Jerusalem, especially since Paley’s book on Jerusalem, The Continuing City (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), taught so many of us so much about that difficult poem. In The Traveller in the Evening, Paley brings the same sort of vast learning and methodical presentation to his discussion of Blake’s later work that we have come to expect from him. As such, The Traveller in the Evening provides an important gateway to the Blakean universe that lies beyond Jerusalem.

The book comprises an Introduction and four chapters, with a brief Supplementary Note. In the Introduction Paley considers Blake’s transformation of For Children: The Gates of Paradise (title page date 1793) into For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise (c. 1820), as a