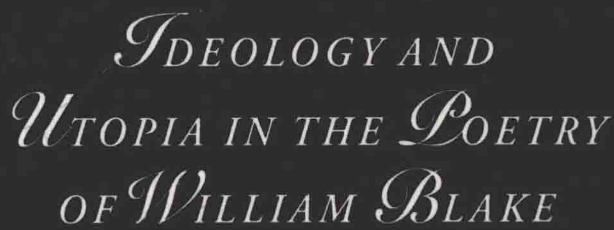

Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake

NICHOLAS M. WILLIAMS

IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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Scholars have often drawn attention to William Blake's unusual sensitivity to his social context. In this book Nicholas Williams situates Blake's thought historically by showing how through the decades of a long and productive career Blake consistently responded to the ideas, writing and art of contemporaries. Williams presents detailed readings of several of Blake's major poems alongside Rousseau's *Emile*, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Paine's *Rights of Man*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Robert Owen's utopian experiments. In so doing, he offers revealing new insights into key Blake texts and draws attention to their inclusion of nations of social determinism, theories of ideology-critique and utopian traditions. Williams argues that if we are truly to understand ideology as it relates to Blake, we must understand the practical situation in which the ideological Blake found himself. Williams' study is a revealing commentary on the work of one of our most challenging poets.

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IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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For my parents

Preface

Like so many critical books on Blake, the present study stands very much in the shadow of two masterpieces of Blake scholarship: Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954). In a way perhaps unprecedented in the study of any other single author, these two books have served as a standard and as a resource for almost all the critical projects which follow them. They provide the language and, in many cases, the tools for much of the scholarship of the last thirty years. One can depart from their conclusions and from their techniques, but only with an intimate and assured knowledge of what it is that one is departing from.

But if many Blake critics have felt the double burden of these two critical monoliths and the necessity of coming to terms with them, surely many have also experienced a sense of the strange incongruity of the two. This incongruity can be most simply expressed by juxtaposing Frye's statement on the importance of Blake studies – "What makes the poet worth studying at all is his ability to communicate beyond his context in time and space"[1] – with Erdman's general statement of intent – "With the growth of interest in Blake as a poet of social vision the need has grown for a methodical study of his thought and art in relation to the history of his own times."[2] Of course, Frye does not deny the need to relate Blake to patterns of thought dominant in the eighteenth century (a thing which he does brilliantly), nor does Erdman's book cast itself as the definitive and conclusive interpretation of Blake's poetry. But the fact remains that these two major productions of the so-called Blake industry approach their subject from almost diametrically opposed directions and so reach almost diametrically opposed conclusions. Indeed, the process of reading Frye's and Erdman's books consecutively is rather like that of ingesting two medicines which stand in

relation to each other as mutual antidotes: Erdman's hard-headed methodical identifications are the perfect antidote to Frye's wide-ranging anagogic speculations, while Frye's expansiveness serves as the ideal antidote to Erdman's sometimes narrow readings. We find ourselves in an odd situation: our twofold panacea appears split down the middle, each part claiming to be the cure for the other part's disease.

It should come as no surprise, however, to find ourselves so quickly at an intersection in Blake criticism, for surely Blake stands at one of the busiest intersections in English literature. Even a partial list of the traditional boundaries which Blake's poetry seems openly to defy would have to include: pictorial art versus textual art, literature versus philosophy, literature versus theology, allegory versus symbol, psychology versus politics, mind versus body, sociology versus phenomenology, science versus art. Blake parades a constant disrespect for the internal coherence and distinctiveness of most traditional Western discourses and even those which have developed since his death. The reader of Blake must constantly be prepared to change the frame of reference for any single poem, from psychology, to politics, to literature, to theology. This is only one element of the "Mental Fight"[3] waged between the reader of Blake's text and the text itself, a fight which has been lost by more than one audacious reader.

But if it is impossible to eliminate the element of struggle in the confrontation with Blake's work ("Without Contraries is no progression," *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 20, E42), the purpose of the following study is at least to describe the field of battle, to identify the common ground upon which antagonistic discourses wage their "intellectual War" (*The Four Zoas*, 139:9, E407). My presupposition is that the barriers which have been placed between the various schools of Blake criticism are neither necessary nor desirable. For too long critical studies have self-consciously adopted their political Blake, their Christian Blake, their Gnostic Blake, without acknowledging that these critical constructs are merely parts of one and the same man. One is tempted to place these critics in the lists of those fallen workmen who "view a small portion & think that All, / And call it Demonstration" (*Jerusalem*, 65:27–8, E216). Clearly, for there to be a war of discourse (even if only an intellectual war) in the poetry and in the interpretation of that poetry, we must be able to imagine a point of contact between the antagonists. Unfortunately,

the practice in the criticism has been all too often to place the combatants in separate cork-lined rooms. What is attempted in the following is an articulation of antagonistic forces in Blake studies or, in directly Blakean terms, a transformation of Negations into Contraries. The concept of Contraries in no way lessens the force of opposition between elements in Blake's work, but it does offer a context against which to consider oppositions in meaningful ways.

In pursuing this study, I have abandoned several critical fictions which have been useful in previous decades of Blake criticism, but which have been questioned more and more convincingly by recent interpreters. The most important of these is the idea that Blake's career presents one integral whole, the entirety of which is expressed in each of the parts. This fiction made possible the more synoptic readings such as (most prominently) Frye's, which read early works such as the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *Poetical Sketches* in terms of the fully developed mythology of *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*. My own study, on the contrary, attempts to pursue a single theme through its progression over the course of Blake's life. Although my idea of the progression in Blake's career is different than his, Morton D. Paley, along with E. D. Hirsch in *Innocence and Experience* (1964), must be cited as an early proponent of the progressive (in all senses of the word) school of Blake criticism for his *Energy and the Imagination* (1970).[4]

A fiction related to that which sees Blake's career as a temporal unity is that which sees his thought as a conceptual unity. The critics who have subscribed to this point of view are those who paint him as a self-assured philosopher, in complete control of the wholeness of his thought, who has only to communicate its meditative fullness in a series of poetic visions. The leading debunker of this critical myth is Leopold Damrosch. In his *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (1980), Damrosch identified a number of central inconsistencies in Blake's thought which plagued him throughout his life.[5] One might say that Damrosch opens the door to synchronic heterogeneity in his work on Blake, while Paley opens the door to diachronic heterogeneity in his. The result is a more complex, more various and, hopefully, more historical Blake, the inhabitant of a changing historical landscape. This is the Blake that I have tried to describe in the following pages.

In abandoning these two fictions of unity, I have also abandoned the conceptual ordering devices which many critical books employ. These devices organize an interpretation of Blake around a series

of conceptual categories such as "Blake's Theology," "Blake's Mythology," "Blake and Mysticism," and so on. Clearly, this ordering scheme implies both the synchronic and diachronic unity of Blake's work, in that it ignores the diachronic dimension almost completely and stresses a unity of thought which holds for the entire Blakean corpus. My own study, after an initial survey of Blake's ideology, will consist of a series of readings of Blake's texts arranged in a roughly chronological order and embedded in considerations of various contexts I consider useful for the study of Blake. I say "roughly chronological" because it has been my concern here to outline Blake's progression through a series of historical strategies, and this concern has necessitated my considering *Europe* in the same chapter with *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in a wider consideration of the place of the female in Blake's poetry, even though *Visions* precedes *Europe* in order of composition. The chronological axis, however, is very important to my thesis, for the purpose of this study is to portray a Blake whose program for social change was always situated in an historical context which conditioned his strategical decisions and finally contained them.

On the question of context, certain readers might accuse me of lying entirely within the camp of David Erdman and tending to "explain" Blake's genius by referring it to patterns of thought prevalent in his time. They may rest assured that such is certainly not my intent, as may be attested to by my lack of attention to strict datings of analogue texts and to considerations of whether Blake had read any given document. My concern is much more with providing analogues to Blake's manner of thought than with providing literal sources for that thought. In Walter Benjamin's term, I am concerned with certain "correspondences" between Blake's solution of the problem of change and the solutions of others – poets, philosophers, scientists, political thinkers.[6] The analogues serve both as a way of defining the problem as it was historically articulated and as a comparative pole for discussing the peculiarity or the conformity of Blake's solutions. In terms of the "mutual antidotes" discussed above, I intend my conceptual background to be the expansive part of a study which will remain intensive in its readings of Blake's texts. Perhaps the most surprising conclusion of this investigation will be that where Blake appears to be at his most transcendent, and least subject to historical precedent and limitation, is precisely where he is reacting most closely to historical pressures and social conditions. In

particular, I hope to suggest that those personages who go by the name of the "religious Blake" and the "political Blake" – who, in some accounts would seem never to have met, or rather, to be sworn enemies – are actually more closely aligned than usually thought. One aspect of the "utopianism" of Blake's text which I have highlighted throughout is the notion that, at least in this historical period, religion can be a powerful form of political radicalism.

As for other analogues quoted throughout my text, references which have no pretension to contemporaneity with Blake's poetry, such as those to Ernst Bloch, Karl Mannheim, the Frankfurt School, Marxists and others, these are intended to express Blake's powerful presence within a tradition of writing which is usually called ideology-critique. Although my intent, once again, is never to propose Blake's identity with the beliefs and vocabulary of the ideology critics, I do intend to suggest a continuity of thought between Blake and the work of those writers whose dominant concern was to describe the limitations of their society and to effect a change of that society. The vocabulary might not be that of "fall" and "redemption," but the anguish in the face of what exists and the passion for its complete eradication remain much the same. In short, I understand and sympathize with E. P. Thompson's side-by-side placement of Blake and Marx in his pantheon of heroes, although I spend much of my time in the following pages illustrating their differences as well as their similarities.

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Although I could not hope, in the manner of Blake's Los, to remember every "Word, work, & wish" that contributed to this project, the most prominent acts of generosity and fellow-feeling are truly unforgettable. For the earliest encouragements in the practices of thoughtful reading, I must thank Larry Thibodeau, Roger Sprague and, especially, Tony Brinkley, whose classes still serve me as a model of non-oppressive inquiry. Lore Metzger, Walter Reed, and John Sitter each offered invaluable advice, much of which has found its way into the final text. Since that earliest hobbled stage, the arguments have been nursed to health and put on their feet by many helpers, to whom much thanks is owed: Judith Anderson, Patrick Brantlinger, Mary Favret, Brian Goldberg, Ken Johnston, Gene Kintgen, Joan Linton, Laura Lovasz, Andrew Miller, Janet Sorensen, and the Indiana University Romantics Reading Group. Special thanks go to Jon Mee, who always had "manuscript-assumed authority" for me, in his exemplary readings of the radical documents of the 1790s, but whose careful and intelligent comments in the later stages of writing left me more directly indebted to him. Josie Dixon and others at Cambridge University Press, particularly Marilyn Butler and James Chandler, have made this first adventure into book-length print much easier than it had any right to be.

Robbie, David and Brynn McCurry, if they look carefully, will also find their influence here. And finally, as a gesture of defiance to those acknowledgements she so hates to read, thanks to Julia McElhattan Williams, who did not type the manuscript for this book nor minister to flagging intellect, but whose effects appear on every page.

Note on the text and abbreviations

The texts of Blake's works referred to are those in David Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (newly revised edition), Garden City, New York: Doubleday Press, 1982 (with commentary by Harold Bloom). The question of stability in Blake's texts is an endlessly vexed one, but I have accepted a "limit of contraction" in using Erdman's stable texts in order to perform the task at hand. I have also accepted Erdman's unnormalized versions of Blake's poetry, in the belief that the occasional grammatic and syntactic undecidability of the poetry is significant and intentional.

The following abbreviations will be used throughout the volume to refer to Blake's works.

ARO	*All Religions are One*
A	*America a Prophecy*
BA	*The Book of Ahania*
BU	*The Book of Urizen*
E	*Europe a Prophecy*
FR	*The French Revolution*
FZ	*The Four Zoas*
J	*Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*
M	*Milton a Poem in 2 Books*
MHH	*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
NRR	*There is No Natural Religion*
PS	*Poetical Sketches*
Songs E	*Songs of Experience*
Songs I	*Songs of Innocence*
Song L	*The Song of Los*
VDA	*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*
VLJ	*A Vision of the Last Judgment*

In multiplate or multipage works, the note will first list the plate or (Blake's) page number, next the line number (for verse works), then the page number in Erdman's revised edition, designated with the letter *E* – e.g., *FZ*78: 9–14, E353.

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CHAPTER I

Blake, ideology and utopia: strategies for change

> Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War.
>
> (*Milton* 1, E95)

I

The present state of Blake criticism can be said to resemble, as it has for several decades past, a state of war. What distinguishes this war in purely Blakean terms, however, is the fact that it cannot be classified easily as either a mental or a corporeal war, but is rather a war between the mental and the corporeal themselves. This is the war between Blake's socially oriented critics and those who would interpret his poetry as an internally coherent, largely mental and necessarily ahistorical triumph. This war is sometimes waged through selectivity: Blake's social critics sometimes neglect *Jerusalem* in particular and the more explicitly religious content of Blake's vision in general; the aesthetic (as I will call them) critics overlook *America* and *The French Revolution*, as well as Blake's detailed descriptions of contemporary working conditions. Sometimes a more frontal assault is waged: I need only recall a rather ugly confrontation in some recent issues of *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* which began over the question of how thoroughly Blake's poetry could be put in a social and intellectual context, but quickly degenerated into charges of "First World arrogance" (against the aesthetic critic) and "projection and denial" (against the sociological critic).[1]

What the present book attempts is a consideration of Blake which suggests that he partly anticipates this debate, that, to put it

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