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William Blake: A Literary Life
(Palgrave, 2005)
by John Beer

JOHN BEER'S *William Blake: A Literary Life* was written for the well-known Palgrave series called 'Literary Lives'. This series focuses on the working lives of remarkable writers and aims 'to trace'—as we read on the back cover 'the professional publishing and social contexts which shaped their writing'. Beer perfectly fulfils this aim, but in the meantime he exceeds it in many stimulating directions. He takes the reader on an extremely competent journey through William Blake's written works, from the early poetical attempts up to the immense complexity of the final prophetic books, never neglecting, though, the iconic side of his legacy, as has often happened in studies devoted to him. Indeed, although in the 'Preface' Beer claims that his prominent 'concern is with Blake's literary life', the book presents commented illustrations from Blake's plates and designs, which are essential in understanding some of the major achievements in the poet's artistic life. Such an approach reveals Beer's significant intuition about Blake's composite art and his acknowledgment that the poetical word is inextricably linked to its visual counterpart.

The volume is divided into thirteen chapters; each dealing with different features of Blake's aesthetics as it chronologically develops in his works. For instance, Beer emphasises the influence of Naturalism on Blake's first book of poems *Poetical Sketches*, the relevance of the poet's religious upbringing for the composition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and the effects of his 'enthusiastic' political views on coeval historical events in *The French Revolution* and in *America*, while *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Europe* and 'The Everlasting Gospel' become an arena for discussing Blake's antinomianism and his intellectual speculations about Enlightenment philosophy. Furthermore, Beer offers a fresh perspective on how to read some of the poems in the posthumous collection *Pickering Manuscript*, like 'The Crystal Cabinet' and 'The Mental Traveller', which deserve more attention than they usually receive.

In particular, I find chapter ten ('Fragmentary Modes of Epic') one of the most engaging and challenging of Beer's book. Here, the author convincingly relates the crucial transition in Blake's poetic biography from the conception of epic expressed in *Vala* and later in *The Four Zoas*¹ to its reconfiguration in the following and greatest prophetic books *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where the poetic and communicative attempt is no longer that of an all-encompassing epic, rather that of an 'epic autobiography', as Beer calls it.

In *Milton*, Blake represents the author of *Paradise Lost* as a poetic model for a new century. For this reason, his challenge as a poet is not that of surpassing

¹ See chapter seven ("Vala" and the Fate of Narrative Epic).

Milton's works, but that of reincarnating his genius. In other words, *Milton* becomes an epic about inspiration and the role of the artist in Blake's time. Such a commitment implies a necessary change of perspective to a more self-focusing one, in the manner of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. On Beer's account, it is exactly under this convergence of themes that one is entitled to define Blake's poetics as 'Romantic'.

Discussing *Jerusalem*, Beer focuses on its baffling, maze-like architecture as emblematic of Blake's major stylistic accomplishment. The poet's final epic is characterised by a 'loose plot-like framework', which overtly escapes any kind of order or formal structure. In this regard, the author's analysis of Blake's working system unquestionably throws fresh light on *Jerusalem*, both as a poem and as a visual object. Moreover, by resisting the temptation of imposing any hermeneutics on the text—which would inevitably undermine its protean nature—Beer complies with its very essence, and draws the reader's attention to the combination of plates as the only key to interpretation. Notwithstanding its division into four chapters, any attempt at 'reading for the plot', or looking for a structure in *Jerusalem* is destined to fail. Beer suggests that we should consider fragmentation itself in terms of a creative visionary arrangement. Accordingly, the plates are inserted 'as they came into being': they follow the flow of inspiration, rather than a pre-determined logic which should obey the laws Blake was strenuously opposing.

Analysing *Jerusalem* in a network of semantic and visual possibilities reveals the modernity of Blake's prophetic poem. Beer's compelling reading makes one think of Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* in which meaning—exactly like in *Jerusalem*—is the result of a never-ending interplay between words and images that lie scattered in the book, as in a game of cards.

In chapter nine, Beer also offers a stimulating consideration of one of the most controversial issues of Blake's biography, both as an artist and as a man: his relation to insanity. He compares Blake's plates with some contemporary pictures and sculptures whose themes are madness and the anatomizing of the mind. For instance, he convincingly claims that William Hogarth's 'The Reward of Cruelty', which describes the dissection of a criminal's body, might be a source of inspiration for Plates 25 and 69 of *Jerusalem*, which show Albion being tortured with his entrails drawn out in a kind of dissection. Commenting on Plate 45 [31] of *Jerusalem*,² Beer suggests that the use of the word 'Bethlehem' could be referred not only to the Christian town, but also to the Bethlehem Royal Hospital (or Bedlam) in Moorfields, which in Blake's times 'had only recently ceased to be a place for the public exhibition of lunatics'. These references are evident support of the hypothesis that Blake was seriously

² The first plate number follows Erdman's standard edition of Blake's works: David Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake. Newly Revised Edition* (New York and London: Anchor Books, 1988). The number in square brackets refers to Keynes' alternative pagination: Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

interested in the effects of insanity on the human brain³—in accordance with the pioneering science of the mind⁴—and that he somehow was artistically trying to cope with a condition he felt close to. Moreover, Beer argues that Blake was desperately attempting to overcome the sense of being haunted by the effects of a world ‘dominated by destructive analysis’, i.e. by an unnatural desire to measure, dissect, calculate, and intellectually possess reality in all its forms and manifestations. It is not by chance that in *Jerusalem*, for example, physical dissection is always performed by negative characters.

The last chapter (‘Prophetic Afterlife’) is devoted to Blake’s addressivity and his influence on modern writing. Apart from the fascination Blake exerted on T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, Beer mentions some writers whose novels overtly refer to his life and works, as for example Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth*, Iris Murdoch’s *The Time of the Angels* and Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (the list keeps growing: today we may add Tracy Chevalier’s latest novel *Burning Bright*). As Beer maintains, these enthralling dialogues with posterity are a sign of Blake’s richness of themes and complexity of thought; actually, they somehow pay him back for a lifelong social and artistic isolation.

The insertion of a chapter on Blake’s afterlife is quite stimulating because it widens the reader’s perspectives on the potentialities of the Blakean experience. Blake’s *corpus* can certainly be better understood in terms of a trans-textual discourse. Its inexhaustibility derives from a network of textual echoes that, as Beer clearly shows, go beyond Blake’s lifetime.

Beer’s vast knowledge of the subject combined with a fine critical acumen has enabled him to produce a highly accurate and comprehensive literary biography enriched by new insights and suggestions. Hence, the book represents a good starting point for readers who are not very familiar with William Blake—although some preliminary information is inevitably taken for granted—and an inescapable point of reference for scholars who wish to enhance their awareness of the artist’s life and work.

³ See Blake’s marginalia on Johann Gaspar Spurzheim’s *Observations on the Deranged Manifestations of the Mind, or Insanity* (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1817).

⁴ Cf. Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).