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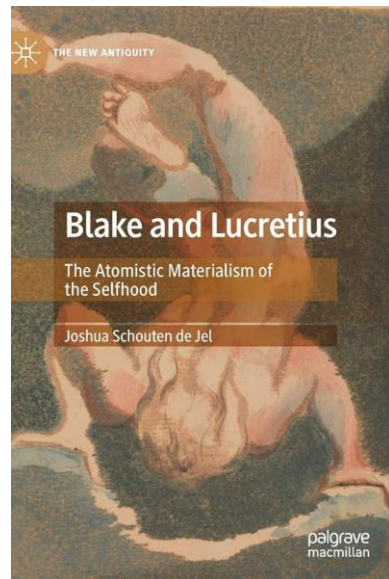
Blake and Lucretius: The Atomistic Materialism of the Selfhood

by Joshua Schouten de Jel¹

WILLIAM BLAKE'S REJECTION OF AND ANIMOSITY towards atomistic materialism is central to his vast mythopoeic expression. Time and again Blake derides the advocates of atomism for misguiding humanity away from eternity towards a materialistic and vegetative existence. Because of their influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Newton, Bacon, and Locke bear the brunt of his attack the most. In his *Annotations to the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, he writes 'Bacon's Philosophy has Ruin'd England Bacon is only Epicurus over again' signalling his acquaintance with Epicurus' atomistic materialism.²

Jonathan Schouten de Jel builds his argument upon this comment and conducts a very intriguing research project. Although Blake's abhorrence of the concept is a given, there has not been much written that focuses directly on a possible link between Blake and atomism, as he does not mention Epicurus or atomism blatantly more than a handful of times. Thus, Schouten de Jel's research is a courageous and risky endeavour, which he successfully bears through a detailed examination of the concept. The undertaking proves even riskier as he formulates his argument not on Blake and Epicurus but on Blake and Lucretius, an atomistic philosopher whom Blake only mentions once.

Schouten de Jel formulates a sound argument, still the difficulty of trying to prove a link between a poet and a philosopher he mentions only once causes him to support his thesis through coincidental correlations and conjectural hypotheses based mostly on what Blake might have read, said, or thought. When he says 'It is telling . . . that Blake associated Bacon's philosophy with Lucretius' (5), he does not propagate this claim through any explicit support. He even admits this shortcoming on page 12 saying 'the ideological association is speculative'. Maybe because of this, the first three chapters try, maybe too hard, to prove the viability of the claim through background and context rather than



¹ Joshua Schouten de Jel, *Blake and Lucretius: The Atomistic Materialism of the Selfhood* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

² David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor, 1982), 645.

direct attention to Blake's ideas. The last three chapters, on the other hand, present a balanced and more grounded argument focused on Blake's works.

In the first chapter of the book, which is also the Introduction, the author develops the outline of his association of Baconian atomism and Lucretian atomism. The amount of sources Schouten de Jel cites displays his extensive knowledge on the Lucretian revival in the sixteenth century, despite being faced with the daunting amount of previous research on the topic. Although he skilfully delivers his findings, one shortcoming of this comprehensive exploration is that he sometimes cites Blake's contemporary works extensively, sometimes even anachronistically (he cites Keats and Shelley, which have no direct effect on Blake's notion of the concept) without discussing why and how these contemporary ideas apply to Blake's ideas. At the end of this chapter the author clearly sets his goals in writing the book: 'to show the centrality of Lucretius and Epicureanism to the corporeality of Blake's physical universe and the subject's postlapsarian engagement with material phenomenality' (21).

The second chapter focuses on Baconian atomism based on Lucretian and Epicurean philosophies. Claiming that 'the distinction between the two classical philosophers [Epicurus and Lucretius] was often blurred during the Enlightenment' (43), Schouten de Jel draws a direct link between Bacon and Lucretius through parallels to and direct citations of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Focusing on Blake's comment in his annotations to Bacon's work and Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses* that Bacon's philosophy is only Epicurus over again, Schouten de Jel highlights the significance of contemporary translations of Lucretius and tries to clear the confusion based on the compression of these classical philosophers (adding Democritus to the equation). After a noteworthy exegesis of the confusion of Epicurus, Lucretius, and Democritus within the sixteenth century through specific quotations from Bacon's works, especially from *Descriptio Globi Intellectualis*, *De Augmentis Scientiarum* and *De Sapientia Veterum*, Schouten de Jel concludes that 'whether Bacon's atomistic principles ultimately derived from Democritus or Epicurus, he *likely* channelled this tradition through Lucretius and considered Lucretius as the mouthpiece for classical atomism' (45).

Chapter Three moves from Bacon to Newton as Bacon, Newton, and Locke are the three most influential materialistic philosophers that Blake believed to be misguiding humanity. Here Schouten de Jel offers significant insights into Blake's painting entitled 'Newton' through a brilliant analysis. Focusing mainly on the idea of the Polypus, he considers the atomistic materiality of Newton as a significant component that has often been neglected. Drawing associations from the descriptions of the polypus in eighteenth century biological studies, Schouten de Jel succinctly concludes that 'Newton's organic effluence is the internalised optical verisimilitude of phenomenological materialism which has become an ontological condition' (81). Admitting that Newton did not borrow directly from either Epicurus or Lucretius but formulated his corpuscular theories based on the ideas of more recent philosophers, Schouten de Jel explains that Newton's principles,

especially those regarding light, lay bare his knowledge of and identification with atomism. His assertion that 'Newton had, by uncovering the relationship between the physical (corpuscular) properties of colour and the degree of refrangibility of those Epicurean 'Solary Atoms', repositioned the principles of colour theory within the overall framework of mathematics' places Newton among the most influential materialistic philosophers and helps understand why Blake was so critical of Newton (85).

From the next chapter on, the analyses and the argument turn directly to Blake's own works based on the contextual study of the preceding pages. The fourth chapter places Blake's idea of Selfhood alongside Lucretian Simulacra. Based on Lucretius' argument that 'Simulacra act in a similar manner to atomistic first-beginnings: they are both stimulated by a natural propulsion and act as the building blocks for larger structures', Schouten de Jel focuses on the inconsistent and unreliable nature of visions and *phantasiae* (122). Applying the principles of Lucretian simulacra and Blakean Selfhood, which he aptly defines as 'the pathological lens through which an unreal psycho-topography maps itself as the external world' (13), he concludes that 'Characters under the dominion of the Selfhood fail to distinguish between spirituality and corporeality until life itself becomes a spectral phenomenon' (115–16). In his analysis of *The Book of Thel*, the author shows how 'Thel's psycho-topography is a Selfhood-projection which has distorted phenomenological existence by mapping mental images onto her field of vision' (137).

The fifth chapter is the most exciting and original chapter in the book. Here Schouten de Jel focuses on Urizenic *Phantasiae* as a manifestation of the Selfhood and explores the psycho-topographical basis of creation and material existence. Concentrating on the phantasmal aspect of Urizen's psychic creation, he highlights Blake's critique of atomistic materialism as a limiting and psychological aspect of the Selfhood wherein he asserts 'material existence can be read as a product of Urizen's psychological formulations (*phantasiae*) from his troubled mental state (Selfhood)' (167–68). He draws parallels between Urizen's materialistic worldview and Lucretian understanding of *Phantasiae* and boldly concludes 'When mankind refuses to engage spiritually with the world and succumbs to the epistemological framework of the Selfhood, then the world appears (and only appears) to lose its spirituality and to operate according to Lucretian atomistic materialism' (167). This, I believe, is the most brilliant observation of this study and clearly justifies Schouten de Jel's undertaking.

The sixth and final chapter of the book focuses on the concept of *machina mundi*, a concept that was in vogue in the eighteenth century, in relation to the mechanistic imagery Blake employs in especially *The Book of Urizen*. Through references from diverse fields and prominent thinkers like Kepler, Payne, Darwin, Leibniz, Descartes, and more, Schouten de Jel highlights how 'Blake's milieu was obsessed with horology and its syllogistic potential' (233). Drawing parallels between the clockwork imagery of the Deistic thinkers as a symbol of 'a divinely ordered universe' (233) and Blake's

mechanistic imagery of chains, rivets, and irons, Schouten de Jel concludes that 'Urizen signifies the deification of a popularised clockwork universe' (237).

All in all, given that Joshua Schouten de Jel traverses uncharted territories, the book is a valuable and intriguing discussion of how Blake's works and ideas relate to Lucretian concepts of atomistic materialism. Formulating such a thorough exploration of these concepts (with ample scholarly footnotes) shows Schouten de Jel's willingness to navigate through uncharted academic waters. The book offers a wide ranging survey of the rising interest in atomistic materialism in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, which in turn establishes Blake's critique of the concept through the three most significant advocates of atomistic materialism, namely Bacon, Locke, and Newton.