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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).<sup>1</sup>

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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another way, Blake himself proposes that thought and culture are historically conditioned. Such an explanation goes a long way towards accounting for an odd feature of Blake's poetry, a simultaneous sense of the exhilarating newness of his conceptions – a newness which seems hardly to have faded since the poems' composition – and of a crushing, almost debilitating pessimism. As a way of registering this doubleness, and of introducing the concepts which will control the following analysis, we might first turn to a poem from the Pickering Manuscript, an unilluminated, unpublished collection of ten lyrics usually dated to the first years of the nineteenth century, during Blake's Felpham period. "The Mental Traveller" is an odd production not only for its appearing in this context of manuscript verse, but for the way it rehearses some of the major themes of his poetry without recourse to the mythological apparatus for which he is best (and most fearsomely) known. Even without this apparatus, the startling newness of Blake's vision is apparent in the double story of a "Babe" given to a "Woman Old," who gets progressively older as she becomes young, only to end once again as an infant, a "frowning form" whose fate recapitulates the poem's opening:

And none can touch that frowning form  
 Except it be a Woman Old  
 She nails him down upon the Rock  
 And all is done as I have told. (101–5, E486)

The elements of this text which mark it as "Blakean," and which have encouraged some to see Blake as a creator distinct from his historical setting, are the seeming freedom from traditional frames of reference and the unusual vividness of the stark imagery. If this is an allegory, and as much is suggested by Blake's tone of normative explanation ("And if the Babe is born a Boy / He's given to a Woman Old" [9–10]), then it is an allegory like no other, whose ties to established cultural codes (the Christian story, classical myth, etc.) are at best oblique. Despite attempts to translate it by reference to these codes or to Blake's own "mythology," the poem retains the characteristics of an interpretive scandal, and seems always fresh in its capacity to resist easy codification.

But if the poem carries with it a shock of newness, a sensation that here is a poetic voice like no other, such a feeling rests uneasily beside the subject matter of the poem itself. That tone of normative

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certainly which gives to Blake's poems their sense of urgency and importance, also lends to them a claustrophobic sense of limitation, of already determined futures and of indefinite repetition. That tale told by the Mental Traveller is one of mental bondage and violence, the Old Woman's crucifixion of the Babe mirrored by his later revenge:

Till he becomes a bleeding youth  
And she becomes a Virgin bright  
Then he rends up his Manacles  
And binds her down for his delight. (21-4, E484)

Indeed, the persistent mirroring in the poem – the boy “Babe” of the opening and the “Female Babe” of the middle, the Old Woman and the man “blind & age-bent” (55), as well as the parallel bindings at the poem's core – all suggest that this world's inhabitants are forced to repeat the same limited repertoire of actions again and again. The feature of the text that has received the most attention, which influenced W. B. Yeats's theory of history, that inverse structure whereby the Woman gets younger as the Man ages and vice versa, itself suggests that the poem depicts a self-contained universe, one in which no amount of recapitulation could create anything new. Although the Man and Woman seem to bear to each other something of the relationship of “Contraries,” they resist the logic of Blake's earlier formulation that “Without Contraries is no progression” (*MHH*<sub>3</sub>, E34): here we would seem to have contraries with no progression, but a sterile round of repeated torture. The complacent cruelty of the last line – “And all is done as I have told” – bids its reader to continue the cycle *da capo*, as if this were a hellish circle which could never end. The manacles of the text are thus extended to the reading process itself.

What are we to make of such an anomaly, such a discontinuity between a seeming originality of insight and the apparent denial of any originality whatsoever? One option, of course, is to attempt to translate the allegory, to figure out what Blake “means” by this strange narrative, most often by interpreting his characters as the equivalents of general concepts, of externalized Nature (the Woman) or Humanity (the Man). But in addition to not respecting the non-specific terms of Blake's poem, such an approach risks overlooking a central element of its powerful effect. It attempts, in a sense, to

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overstep the boundaries that Blake evocatively establishes in the poem's opening stanza:

I travld thro' a Land of Men  
 A Land of Men & Women too  
 And heard & saw such dreadful things  
 As cold Earth wanderers never knew. (1-4, E483)

We might take the speaker here to mean that he is reporting on a non-Earthly scene in the lines that follow, that he is a kind of proto-spaceship recording extra-terrestrial happenings for the home planet (such science-fictional frameworks are not inappropriate for the author of "An Island in the Moon"). But what is more likely is a logical opposition of the "Mental Traveller" of the title and the "Earth wanderers" of line 4, distinguishing between two modes of travel rather than two destinations. What the lines suggest, in other words, is an even more striking anomaly at work in the poem, a contradiction between the uniformity of event described ("all is done as I have told") and the complete lack of knowledge of those events on the part of those who are forced to suffer through them. One might, of course, simply take this as an assertion of poetic vision, in the transhistorical sense, making a claim for the poet's ability to see beyond the time-bound, mundane conceptions of the "Earth wanderers" to the effulgent realities of transcendent truth. By such an interpretation, the poem's opening stanza represents a strong instance of what might be called the "aesthetic ideology" or, even more specifically, the "Romantic ideology," in its privileging of the ideal over the real, the mental over the physical, the intellectual over the corporeal.<sup>2</sup> But what complicates this picture is the fact that what the Mental Traveller sees is a vision of extreme corporeality, or, to put it another way, what the poem develops is itself a theory of ideology. If the opening stanza proposes an opposition between what the Mental Traveller can hear and see and what the Earthly wanderers can know, we have yet to consider the later description of the perceptual abilities of the "Guests" who invade the old man's cottage:

The Guests are scatterd thro' the land  
 For the Eye altering alters all  
 The Senses roll themselves in fear  
 And the flat Earth becomes a Ball. (61-4, E485)

Juxtaposed with the magisterial eye of the Mental Traveller, whose

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vision seems to be raised above the physical, we have this very material, sense-bound “Eye” whose power, or lack of power, effectively creates the world around it. Beside the transcendent recording of reality, the objective “knowing” glance of an authoritative viewer, we have something much closer to what has come to be known as the social construction of reality, the sense that the viewer him/herself plays a large role in creating the observable world, or, in Blake’s extremely condensed formulation, that “the Eye altering alters all.”

It is as an attempt to trace the convolutions of this double perspective in Blake’s work that the following book is designed. In particular, it suggests that the excellent work already done in ascertaining Blake’s ideology, placing him in his social, historical, and political contexts, needs to be supplemented by a consideration of the role played by Blake’s own deployment of a proto-concept of ideology.<sup>3</sup> And as this brief initial analysis of “The Mental Traveller” suggests, it looks particularly at the way an extreme formulation of ideology as the total determination of consciousness – what Blake might have called “fallenness” – interacts with other perspectives which posit a limit to, an escape from, ideology. The Mental Traveller tells stories of limited sensual abilities, paralyzed consciousness, but the very ability to tell these stories presumes a point beyond their purview, a point from which they can be “known” and, in some cases, changed. I take as a founding presupposition of what follows that Blake’s goal in most of his work is a kind of traveling, a kind of change, but that rather than be satisfied with mere “mental traveling,” the path of this career is a search for the route to that total engagement of human capacities, in both individual and social forms, which he called “Eden.” The path to Eden will not be found by an evasion of ideology, by a mentalized ideal vision of easeful love (what Blake called *Beulah*), but instead by a harsh imagining and reimagining of the ideological world. It is in this sense of a hard-won and reimagined vision of the ideological world that I will call Blake’s Edenic visions “utopian,” distinguishing this use of the word from its other, less politically viable meanings.

The reader will find in what follows numerous comparisons to writers contemporary with Blake, as well as to twentieth-century theorists of ideology and its critique. This partly expresses my notion that the end of the eighteenth century sees a shift in thought which

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can broadly be related to the development of the modern concept of ideology (a shift indicated by more than the simple fact that the word was coined during this period). It is also intended to suggest that Blake's works might reasonably be illuminated by comparison to thinkers who struggled to square their notion of the social determination of reality with a desire for meaningful liberational change. In addition, my choice of analogues for the various periods of Blake's career (Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Burke, Paine, and Owen) is meant to counter the belief, largely dispelled but still occasionally encountered, that Blake is a thinker outside of time, not subject himself to ideological constraint. It is my belief that if we are truly to understand ideology as it relates to Blake, to understand "Blake's ideology," then we must understand the practical situation in which the ideological Blake (both the Blake submitted to ideology and the Blake who used ideology) found himself and the task he had at hand. As such, the following sequence of chapters attempts something half way between a chronological tour through Blake's development of his concept of ideology and a thematic treatment of issues pertinent to the topic. The current chapter, after a brief typology of concepts of ideology and their range of meaning, turns to a general consideration of the place of both ideology and utopia in Blake's work by means of a few examples. Chapter 2 then considers a sector of vital importance for the study of ideology, the educational system, comparing Rousseau's plan for humane schooling in *Emile* with Blake's experiment in transformational children's literature, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Chapter 3 turns to a problem which continues to be of central importance to any discussion of Blake's ideology, his attitude towards and representation of women. Two Blake poems which feature central female characters, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *Europe: A Prophecy*, are read in the light of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a work with which Blake would no doubt have been familiar due to his and Wollstonecraft's participation in the Joseph Johnson circle. The remaining chapters trace a more determinate arc of progression, modeled in part on Karl Mannheim's identification of the "utopian mentalities" he labeled the "liberal-progressive," the "chiliastic" and the "socialist-communist."<sup>4</sup> My argument, broadly stated, is that rather than interpreting Blake's move from the historical poems of the 1790s (*America*, *Europe*) to the prophetic books of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, as a rejection of politics or a retreat into

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religion,<sup>5</sup> as they are still sometimes characterized today, they should instead be seen as separate attempts to solve a central sociopolitical problem: how (to use Marx's terms) does a realm of freedom emerge from a realm of necessity? Chapter 4, comparing Blake's vision of history to Burkean historiography, suggests that the answer in these poems might relate to a liberal-progressivist belief in the salutary effects of time. Chapter 5, which compares the apocalyptic *Milton* to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, sees Blake's solution in this period lying closer to an individualistic, chiliastic break with the past. Finally, in a consideration of a work which has too often been marked with an imaginary warning, "For Blake enthusiasts only," *Jerusalem* is compared with Robert Owen's turn-of-the-century experiments in communal societies, as a way of thinking about Blake's broadening focus in the last work of his life.

## II

Although the (French) word *idéologie* was coined by the philosopher of education Destutt de Tracy during Blake's lifetime, in the period of the French Directory, the modern analytic concept of ideology properly begins in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many of the complications which I intend to explore in this thumbnail sketch of the concept can most easily be derived from Marx's famous statement of 1859, dating some thirteen years after his first use of the term in *The German Ideology*: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."<sup>7</sup> The debate within Marxism and within non-Marxist theories of ideology revolves around the precise sense in which social being can be said to determine consciousness, as well as around conflicting definitions of all three of these central terms, "social being," "determination," and "consciousness." It is through examination of the shifting meanings of these terms that we can construct a typology of ideology and ideological strategies with which to compare Blake's own strategy of ideology-critique.

The strategic dimension of Marx's concept of ideology is foregrounded in his early works, the *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* (1843) and *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for his intent in these works is a selective critique of specific targets rather than a universalization of the concept. The *Critique of Hegel*, although

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not using the word itself, develops a model of ideology as inversion which, as we shall see in chapter 6, is of particular interest in assessing Blake's strategies in *Jerusalem*. Here, Marx criticizes Hegel for his abstract philosophy of right which assigns agency to the state considered as a theoretical entity rather than to the lived experience of "actual men" (*sic*): "The German thought-version [*Gedankenbild*] of the modern state . . . which abstracts from the actual man, was only possible because and in so far as the modern state abstracts itself from actual man, or satisfies the whole man only in an imaginary way."<sup>8</sup> Ideology, as expressed here, is Hegel's inversion of the real agency of government, his tendency to make "actual man" the predicate of an action for which he is really (in Marx's view) the subject. The process of ideology-critique then becomes, as Paul Ricoeur insightfully names it, "the reversal of a reversal" (*Ideology and Utopia*, 27); the righting of an upside-down perspective on the world. As the later Marx famously puts it, the dialectic in Hegel "is standing on its head. It must be inverted in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."<sup>9</sup>

What is important for our purposes in this concept of ideology as inversion is the strategic nature of Marx's formulation at this early stage of his career. At this period Marx is not attempting, as he and his followers would later do, to posit the universality of ideology or to propose a universal methodology of ideology-critique. The process of inversion is very practical and very localized. It involves an active procedure of reinversion which one might imagine is different for each case: one cannot reinvert Feuerbach in precisely the same way one reinverts Hegel. Neither is the concept of inversion an indictment of consciousness or of ideas as a whole: the process of reinverting Hegel results in a consciousness grounded in material practices, not in the elimination of consciousness *per se*. The *Critique of Hegel* still works very much within the mainstream of Western philosophy, merely tinkering with some of its formulations as expressed in *The Philosophy of Right* and attempting to ground them in practical human experience.

The universalization of ideology only begins with Marx's explicit use of the term in *The German Ideology*. He still retains his concept of inversion, giving it perhaps its best-known formulation: "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down, as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does



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from their physical life-process.”<sup>10</sup> But the concept of ideological inversion intended here is much more sweeping, as all-encompassing, in fact, as the universal process of an object’s inversion by the lens of the eye.<sup>11</sup> Although Marx’s explicit target here is the Young Hegelians, the scope of his metaphor has expanded the scope of ideology’s application. The stated intent of the analysis is to ground thought in reality, but at times Marx retreats into a universal condemnation of thought itself, as when he issues his challenge in the preface: “Let us revolt against the rule of thought” (*German Ideology*; 37). The assignment of ideology to consciousness *per se* no longer serves a purely strategic purpose – that of debunking Hegelianism – but also serves a universal purpose – the calling into doubt of consciousness itself. Marx’s general dissatisfaction with philosophy, with consciousness, as a whole can be detected in his titanic declaration in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” composed the year before the publication of *The German Ideology*: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>12</sup> The break with philosophy is complete here and the concept of ideology is used as a springboard to propel Marx beyond philosophy into a properly material dialectic.

The universalization of the concept of ideology continues to occupy Marxist and non-Marxist theorists into the twentieth century, particularly in the works of Karl Mannheim and Louis Althusser. Mannheim’s contribution to the concept of ideology was his realization that ideology expanded to incorporate his own position as philosopher and observer of history. The curious position of the ideology critic, whose own critique is itself subject to the charge of ideology, has become known as “Mannheim’s paradox.” While Mannheim’s subsequent attempts to regain the Archimedean point from which to critique ideology have met with general contempt in both Marxist and non-Marxist circles, the potency of his initial discovery and its widespread implications cannot be ignored in a discussion of ideology. One thinker who has not ignored Mannheim, and whose theoretical formulations are more widely appreciated, is Louis Althusser. Althusser incorporates a universal theory of ideology within his larger structural system by defining ideology as a “lived” relationship to the world, which, as all living people have a “lived” relationship to the world, is necessarily universal.<sup>13</sup> Althusser’s formulation is definitively posed in his book *For Marx*:

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In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an “imaginary,” “lived” relation. Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their “world,” that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence. In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or reactionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality. (*For Marx*, 233–4)

It is worthwhile quoting this rather difficult and lengthy section of Althusser’s argument because through it we can begin to appreciate the complications introduced into the Marxist theory of ideology by a particularly narrow reading of Marx’s idea of social being determining social consciousness. For Althusser’s complex machinery of overdetermination, real versus imaginary relations between men and their world, is largely the result of his lifelong struggle with the late Marxist model of base and superstructure. Within this model, which is fleshed out from some passing comments Marx made in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and later canonized by more doctrinaire forms of Marxism, the cultural output of a society is reduced to a mere reflection of its economic base. The appeal is to an architectural metaphor, where the economic system – the means of production and the relations of production – serves as the base to support the secondary and derivative productions of culture – the superstructure – whether they be art, law, religion, or philosophy. Althusser’s concept of overdetermination is an attempt to come to terms with the obvious inadequacies of this model, its failure to account for the diversity and seeming independence of cultural productions. But as Paul Ricoeur has noted, Althusser finally remains dogmatically faithful to the base/superstructure model and is led to oppose culture to the “real” conditions of existence, thus relegating ideology to the dubious sphere of “imaginary relations” (*Ideology and Utopia*, 331). The correction of ideology’s illusions, as one might expect, is left to the “scientific” system of (Althusserian) Marxism, itself immune to ideological traps by virtue of its suprapersonal objectivity.

One of the most cogent critics of the base/superstructure model, Raymond Williams, has offered a convincing diagnosis of the problems which led to such a narrow formulation and has himself