

Joseph Childers

Opposing the Paradigm: The Example of Blake

With the publication in 1980 of *Is There a Text in This Class?*¹, Stanley Fish pried open a Pandora's box of issues which had been, for the most part, either ignored or dismissed in the flurry of establishing postmodernism as the hermeneutic mode of the moment. As the argument of *Is There a Text* develops, it becomes increasingly clear that Fish is not merely concerned with examining his own theoretical presuppositions, but that he is also attempting to focus on the claims of theory and the authority of professional interpretive communities which legitimize those claims.

In the "professionalism" debate that has been raging through the pages of literary, social, and philosophical journals, Fish has often been accused of ignoring an important, indeed perhaps the most vital, aspect of any scholarly community—change, both in a social and literary sense. In a forthcoming book, Fish deals with his omission, and agrees that the concept of change is one of the informing principles of interpretive communities, and consequently of theory; but he warns of several pitfalls which accompany our conventionalist interpretive epistemology, the epistemology which most of us as postmoderns share in when we speak of meaning. Few of us believe any longer in "meaning" in an essentialist sense, as something which we can capture and describe or evaluate. Rather, we adopt the boundaries which declare meaning ever problematic and deferred. The problem for Fish, and for all of us is bound up in our participation in this epistemology. If, as Richard Rorty has said in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, it is the case that "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language"²; or, as T. S. Kuhn has argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself³, then it is evident that we will never be able to compare our paradigm-specific world with any way of understanding that is not accompanied by some already established and operative frame of reference. Nor will we be able to consider changes in our way

of seeing the world, for the world, our text, is defined by the circumscription of the boundaries of "meaning" to which we have all agreed. As Fish points out, "it is no longer possible to see change as occurring when the world or a piece of the world forces us to revise or correct our description of it; since descriptions of the world are all we have, changes can only be understood as change in description..."⁴

But the question of how change occurs remains, regardless of whether through language the world constitutes us or we constitute it. A change in description is as monumental a change as any political revolution and perhaps more difficult to analyze, for as Fish asks, "How can a mind that cannot see anything beyond its horizon change?" (*Change*) The apparent alternatives which Fish offers are a tribute to his strawman strategy, since there seem to be only two ways of accounting for change: either the mind is able to account for something which it does not already presuppose — consequently paradigms are influenced by something independent of them, or the mind remains encircled by its assumptions and no one ever changes her mind. Of course, these alternatives *are* only strawmen, and Fish predictably offers possibilities infinitely more suited to our ideas of what change may be:

Change of one kind occurs when already in-place principles of relevance and noticeability cause an interpretive attention to be paid to something new, which is not really new at all since it is immediately seen as an instance or modification of a relationship internal to the community. And (2) change of another, and in some sense deeper kind occurs when the principles of relevance and noticeability are themselves altered by confronting those who hold them with principles of a greater generality and arguing that a commitment to those principles requires that more be taken into account than had hitherto been assumed. (*Change*)

The importance of these counter-explanations of change is that the community is responsible, finally, for all change. The community with which Fish is concerned is the interpretive community of literary critics and theorists, but any group working primarily with language, while it may be influenced by external, especially political, events, will ultimately determine the course of the change within the rules of its community. There is always something within the paradigm which is conducive to change, and those in the community either will recognize a new phenomenon as not new at all but as an "instance or modification of the relationship internal to the community" or will evaluate the phenomenon in terms of a *re-evaluation* of the assumptions held by those in the community.

The significance of understanding how shifting perceptions and relationships to commonly held principles influence change in the com-

munity is important not only to us in examining our profession as Fish would have us do, but in examining the object of our profession, the literature and the social conditions which produce literature. The production of any text, and especially what we have come to designate a "literary" text, takes place within a discourse, a discourse whose norms and rules are historically familiar to the critic. Also, it is usually the case that the literary critic, because of his or her place in time relative to the text, possesses "independent knowledge that these norms and the society they presupposed were changing" in ways and for reasons the discourse could not recognize.⁵

Certainly such situations often obtain, and just as certainly, many texts are affected by discursive changes which are nascent, not yet available for articulation, yet nevertheless important to the formation of texts even if only by their absences in those texts. But this argument presupposes that literary texts, at least those which attain a canonical status, are produced within dominant discursive structures which may or may not be able to recognize their own changing norms. Equally important to literary critics should be those instances in which texts are produced *outside*, or at odds with, the dominant discourse, as for example in the case of William Blake's poetry. Blake's work now corresponds with the paradigmatic practices of his time primarily because of the revisionism of literary historians whose desire to situate Blake in the "Romantic" tradition anachronistically places him within a discourse which was, for the most part, as closed to him as the Enlightenment tradition he attacked in his written work. An alternative, more historically accurate, and ultimately more fruitful way of considering Blake's poetic discourse and its relation to the social and literary practices of his period is to focus on the tension between his own way of seeing the world and his society's.

An investigation of that very tension should elucidate Blake's relation to the discursive practices of his time, and thereby assist us in a rethinking of the ways epistemic, and thus literary, change takes place. Thus we are left with simple questions but intricate answers when we confront Blake's texts in this new light. Because we accept the notion of change developing from within the community, in Blake's case the literary/artistic community of late eighteenth century Britain, we must first ask to what extent are Blake's texts (for the purposes of this essay, his earlier ones) determined by the assumptions of that community. However, if we accept the common interpretation of Blake as an individualistic thinker and visionary, we must also question the difference between the assumptions of Blake's texts and assumptions which informed those texts. Finally, we must confront the question of how

these texts and “new” assumptions are incorporated and legitimized by the existing paradigm and how they help instigate epistemic change.

To begin answering such questions we need to recognize the burgeoning of a culture industry in the late eighteenth century, which placed artists in a precarious position as far as their commitment to their art was concerned. As Raymond Williams has pointed out in *Culture and Society*,⁶ patronage, as it had been known, was fast dying out and the increasingly literate public made the free market the dominant arbiter of the production of literary works, thus changing the relationship between the writer and his reading public. This change is of the first type Fish identifies. Free market competition is not inherently different from patronage except in its scope. The commodified relationship of author to text already existed under the patronage system, and the shift to free market competition is really only a modification of that relationship. But because everyone who reads and buys literature has become a potential patron, and because these formerly excluded patrons are now participating in the shaping of the literary community’s assumptions by injecting formerly excluded but always incipient assumptions into the already-in-place paradigm, the writer is forced to come to terms with the shifting power structure of the literary community. The locus of legitimization shifts from aristocratic patrons to bourgeois readers.

We see then that even though this change in the relationship of writer to reader is only a modification of an earlier relationship, and consequently not of the second, “deeper” kind of change Fish identifies, it does help lay the groundwork for an account of that deeper, confrontational change by placing writers in a Weberian dilemma. The increasing commodification of the literary product, together with the new relationship between writer and readers, forces a writer to cater to readers’ tastes, which will place him or her in society as a “professional,” one who writes for subsistence, one who writes occupationally instead of vocationally; or a writer can remain true to his or her calling, committed to the art rather than to the living that may be gained from producing that art. Obviously, this dilemma is in many cases an either/or fallacy; writers may produce both vocationally and occupationally. However, for Blake this option did not exist, and he was forced to choose which type of writer he would become.

Whichever horn of the dilemma any writer grasps, the final power of legitimization lies with the reading public and is exercised at the bookstalls. Should a writer be accepted and his writings become popular, his ideas become even more closely linked to the assumptions shared by the public. In popular terms, he bolsters the reigning ideology. Yet in his becoming legitimized another aspect of the old patron-

artist relationship is modified, for the writer gains a certain amount of power over his audience by attaining a position of authority and knowledge. He has become a recognized participant in the commodified intellectual/artistic community because he has accepted the assumptions which control it; yet he retains a privileged place because he articulates those assumptions, for a price. With this assumed power, an occupational writer is in a position to subvert the order of things, but that subversion must take place within the paradigm which has subsumed him. The writer builds his arguments on societal presuppositions, at least initially, so he can fortify his own stance within the community while dismissing others.' This means that any movement away from the shared elevated concepts of society will happen not only within the paradigm, but progressively, unilaterally. Thus when we study ideological changes, we often are tempted to account for them in the same manner, literally rather than genealogically. We tend to write histories of continuities rather than to describe the discourses which constitute the ideological paradigms of the periods in question.

While to some extent the kernel for every paradigm is found in preceding paradigms, we cannot account for all change as completely from within. The example of Blake is a case in point. It is common knowledge that Blake was notoriously unsuccessful as a poet and that he was forced to print and distribute his own works. Nor could we say that his poetry was read by the legitimizing public. His early poetry especially found audience mostly among acquaintances such as Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Godwin, who while sympathetic toward Blake's work were themselves in tenuous positions within the paradigm. Therefore, in terms of power, Blake wielded little, but by the same token, since he was not attempting to find patronage in a legitimizing public, he was not bound by the constraints of society. As far as his writing, Blake became, truly, an unattached intellectual, for his poetry and his subsistence were not linked. Not only was Blake free to propagate a different set of assumptions than those demanded of the occupational writer, he was also able to confront and radically oppose the presuppositions he inherited from the existing paradigm, demanding that more be taken into account than had previously been assumed.

Change effected through opposing and examining existing presuppositions seems to imply a progress very much akin to subversive change; that is, a position of greater understanding and delimited perception is achieved by moving beyond the confines of one's way of seeing the world. Indeed Max Weber in his famous essay "Wissenschaft als Beruf" proposes that *Wissenschaft* (translated variously as science or acquired knowledge) works precisely in this way. Those

before us labour to understand only so that their knowledge can be used to supersede itself. Knowledge builds upon itself in a never ending progression, leading nowhere but to the question: what is the meaning of science, the value of knowledge?⁷

This is the question that Blake asks, and the question which defines him as oppositional rather than subversive in his tactics for inducing change. To work from within the paradigm does indeed give the appearance of progress, and may even be confused with the effects of oppositional tactics. Blake understands very early that efforts from within the faltering reason-based assumptions of the Enlightenment lead to drastic *external* change, but the resulting paradigm will be one based on even more rationalizations. For Blake, participation in the existing paradigm — even for the purposes of subversion — strengthens rather than breaks the “mind-forg’d manacles” endemic in rationalism. T S. Kuhn has written of Copernicus that his recognition of the Ptolemaic paradigm’s failure when applied to its own traditional problems was prerequisite to a search for a new paradigm (69). Similarly with Blake, it is partly this recognition that informs the difference between Innocence and Experience.

Innocence participates in the existing paradigm with the trustfulness of a child, and the paradigm’s explanations of its failings are articulated through the Innocent persona. Thus we have the product of the practical application of rational thought and increasing industrialization, the “Chimney Sweeper” in *Songs of Innocence*, who dreams of “thousands of sweepers” locked in black coffins, set free by an angel with a bright key who tells little Tom Dacre “if he’d be a good boy/he’d have God for his father and never want joy.”⁸ Of course, as has often been pointed out, the realm of Innocence is not one of idyllic pleasure and safety. Instead, it is a place of spiritual resilience, a condition which allows one to dream of a better world. But it is also a submission to the hegemonic practices of the society that has created want and suffering, and created the need to escape it.

The irony of the “Chimney Sweeper” in *Songs of Innocence* is that the rationalism which has helped to create the conditions in which chimney sweeps “flourish,” is dependent on an irrational and transcendent utopianism as a means of confronting the anguish of daily existence. Further, this utopia is the product not of a trained, rational mind, but of the imaginative mind of a child; an urchin who was sold before he could talk, and whose theology is a confused jumble of Calvinistic platitudes about doing one’s duty and contorted images of a Saint Peter whose key is not for opening the gates to the kingdom of heaven but for releasing the sweeps from their black coffins of oppression.

This malformed, childlike antidote to the poisonous, self-perpetuating human condition described by Blake in both books of the *Songs* is carrion comfort to the "Chimney Sweeper" of Experience. He does not so readily believe that "if all do their duty they need not fear harm," for he sees the material consequences of being forced to participate in a society in which "God & his Priest & King/. . . make up a heaven of our misery" (Blake 23). In Experience the utopia is already extant and is very exclusive. There is no promise of something better at some other level of existence; the religion and state of Blake's society, inexorably bound up with the rationalism of the late Enlightenment has failed to solve its own problems. Indeed, it has exacerbated them, and the conditions necessary for change obtain. Blake dramatically emblemizes these conditions in the famous stanzas of "London" where he writes:

And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear. (Blake 26-27)

The "marks of weakness" and "marks of woe" are for Blake the result of a particular way of seeing the world which, as I stated earlier, strengthen rather than lessen the hold of the "mind-forg'd manacles" on individuals and thus society. And, for Blake, the conditions which call out for change cannot be altered for they are the result of succumbing to the "Philosophical and Experimental" which threaten to become "the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again" ("There Is No Natural Religion," Blake 3). These are the principles of relevance and noticeability which must be confronted by principles of a greater generality, namely the potentialities of the human soul. Blake is arguing that progression is necessary, but the progression delineated and limited by the boundaries of reason and sense perception not only does not answer the needs of the individual, but alienates the individual from the self. Blake demonstrates the extreme measure of this alienation in his poem "The Fly," equating the existence of a fly to the existence of man; both are equally explicable by the Philosophical and Experimental, both are equally at the mercy of Natural Law; both the life of the individual and the life of the fly have been disenchanted, reduced to the rational, predictable, and static, that "dull round." Both depend on thought, the rational, for existence if, as Blake writes, "...thought is life/ And strength and breath/ And the want of thought is death" (Blake 23). In order to return to a progression of the human soul, humankind must syn-

thesize and harmonize its vision both politically and spiritually. As Blake says in his 1798 commentaries on the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds:

The Arts & Sciences are the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Governments. Why should A Good Government endeavour to Depress what is its Chief & only Support?

The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science. Remove them or Degrade them, & the Empire is No More. Empire follows Art & Not Vice versa, as Englishmen suppose. (Blake 636)

Thus it is through the arts and sciences, the understanding of the unseen (in Blake's time the word "science" did not have the empirical connotations it has for us today) that true progress is achieved. For Blake, political discourse is constituted by poetic discourse, and while the arts may depend upon politics for longevity and livelihood, they by no means depend on politics for their genesis. This type of understanding is "Knowledge of Ideal Beauty [and] is Not to be Acquired. It is Born with us. Innate Ideas are in Every Man, born with him; they are truly Himself" (Blake 648). To depend on the rational, especially in its material form, or to inductively come to understanding through empirical reasoning whose "First Principle is Unbelief" is in Blake's view to succumb to a narrowness of understanding which continually reinforces itself by negating (not opposing) the importance of innate understanding. The ultimate consequences of this type of thinking are an inability to reconcile contraries and stagnation in a skepticism which can observe but cannot answer the famous questions posed in "The Tyger." The paradox in the question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" is insoluble for a rationalistic or empirical way of thinking. The "immortal hand or eye" is inexplicable. And Blake is asking these questions of the paradigm which has pushed him to its intellectual and aesthetic margin just as it has pushed the chimney sweep of Experience to its religious and political margin.

Blake's answers to his own questions, however, do not remove humankind from itself in order to find solace in a transcendental God. Rather God becomes immanent, personal, particular. Indeed, humanity occupies an even greater place in his order of things than in the Enlightenment order he opposes. Blake is intent upon tearing the mask from an artificial religion still firmly entrenched in social discourse and based in Puritan-Calvinism which perpetuates the problem of humanity opposing itself. To Blake, the dogmas and doctrines which he inherits are manufactures, rationalizations which too easily explain the oppositional nature of the human soul. Likewise, doctrines such as The Fall tend to imbue all things with the qualities of good and evil,

which as Blake points out in one of his later works, *Jerusalem*, are made into an abstract, "which is a Negation/ Not only of the Substance from which it is derived/ A murderer of its own Body, but also a murderer/ Of every Divine Member. . . ." It is only in a religion of humanity in which "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" that the unfragmented Divine Image can have its place. Only in a religion devoid of chapels with "Thou Shalt Not" written over the doors, only in a religion of the poetic genius which synthesizes, yet always particularizes the contraries of the human soul can any sort of transcendence take place. But the transcendence is in itself contrary in that since it is not established through rationalism or empiricism it cannot be considered a temporal moving forward, but rather a progression through the return to those innate ideas "Born in Every Man." It is a return to a belief in the inexplicable and the unseen.

These, in brief, are the rules of Blake's paradigm, and they are rules which are based on negation and refutation of the tradition he inherited, a tradition which he believed would not stand up to its own scrutiny, could not answer the questions it posed. But even in his rules for working against the prevailing paradigm, we find the contraries of negation and opposition. Blake does judge and refute the social and intellectual consequences of Enlightenment thought, but he does not discard all its aspects as useless. Urizen is a necessary component of Blake's mythological system because it aids in a complete redemption of humanity, a redemption which is conscious of itself yet inseparable from desires and feelings. If however, reason is placed above desire and feelings, the result is "The Human Abstract" which creates "proper" action from improper motivation: "Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody poor"; "And mutual fear brings peace/ Till the selfish loves increase"; humility takes root under the foot of cruelty. The tree of knowledge of good and evil grows in the human mind, the result of human see (see Blake 27) and the "Divine Image" of humanity becomes the secretive, cruel, terrorized world of the society humanity has created in its forges of iron (see Blake 32).

While the change Blake attempts is a revolution in the modern sense of the word, the creation and putting in place of something new, it also partakes of the older sense of "revolution" a reinstatement of something specific which had been lost, a coming full circle. It is "Little Girl Found," a return to radical innocence, yet with the addition of the knowledge gained through experience. Blake's search for a new paradigm and his eventual development of an original mythological system are attempts at hastening the recovery of that which has been lost —the divine, harmonized vision of humanity — so that along with what has been learned that vision can be used in ways which recognize and

ameliorate the injustices of "experience." Thus Blake's tactics for change are informed by both a revolutionary and reactionary sense. The reaction, however, is not to some increasingly predominant new way of thinking, as is Edmund Burke's for example, but to the faltering already-in-place system of thought. Yet recognizing the immanent forward movement of humanity, to return to a more innocent way of thinking means to offer a new and consequently oppositional system, one that can include and complement the existing one, not replace it. The very nature of what has been loosely described as Blake's dialectic necessitated that Blake oppose rather than subvert. For Hegel, Reason ultimately constitutes the march of progress in the state, and Reason is most present when it appears not to be. For Blake, however, Poetic Genius must be nurtured by the individual as well as the state; it can be buried by its contrary when Reason and Imagination are cast as negatives. The tension of the dialectic cannot ever be fully reconciled without the risk of stasis. Thus while the telos of a Hegelian dialectic is the state built through the cunning of Reason, Blake's telos is the reintegration of those innate qualities in every person which inherently oppose the dominance of Reason at the cost of all else. Subversive tactics of change necessarily destroy one paradigm to replace it with another. Blake's oppositional change is additive and pluralistic, not absolute, and it is this pluralism which in Blake's mind accommodates the progress necessary for spiritual and political amelioration and shifts the locus of the formation of the rules of the constitutive paradigm from the human mind to the human imagination.

NOTES

1. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1980).
2. Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. x x.
3. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 57-59 and *passim*. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
4. Stanley Fish, *Change*, forthcoming as a collection of essays from Columbia University Press. I wish to thank Professor Fish for allowing me to quote from unpublished material and for making that material available to me.
5. J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1985), p. 13.
6. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1983); see chapter II, "The Romantic Artist," pp. 30-48.
7. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in *Essays from Max Weber*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford U.P., 1946), p. 138.
8. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically, by page number, in the text. All references to poems, unless otherwise indicated, are to *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience*.