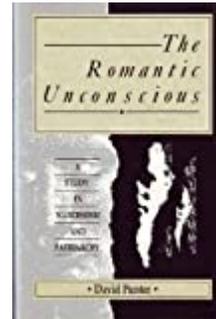




David Punter. *The Romantic Unconscious: A Study in Narcissism and Patriarchy.* New York: New York University Press, 1990. x + 200 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6612-5.



Reviewed by Ralph Dumain

Published on H-Albion (June, 1994)

Deconstructing David Punter - Part 1

I have just started reading *The Romantic Unconscious: A Study in Narcissism and Patriarchy* by David Punter (New York University Press, 1990). I've been out of touch with the state of Blake criticism for a decade and a half. I remember that one of the last scholarly articles on Blake that I had read was Punter's 1977 article on the imagery of labor in Blake's poetry, which to me signified a promising new direction. In the early 1980's the linguistic turd (oops - "linguistic turn") in philosophy and criticism was only beginning to infect Blake studies (that's my vague impression, anyway). I am too out of touch to know just how much damage has been done in Blake studies in the interim, but it appears that fifteen years of deconstructionist bullshit have taken their toll in all areas of humanistic scholarship. So here I am, face to face (or face to page) with Punter once again, and I am not happy about what the years have done to him.

I'm going on first impressions only, but you are invited to kibbitz as I make my way through this book. I skipped from the first chapter, on the general problem of interpretation (sometimes poetically if murkily written) to a couple of later sections dealing with Blake specif-

ically. Although I feel that anybody who would even deploy the word "deconstruction" ought to be horse-whipped, the other significant ingredients in Punter's recipe from what I see so far are psychoanalysis and feminism.

Let me quote from the section on "The instituting of Blake":

"Blake, clearly, is the auteur who resists deauthorisation. Through all our awareness of the historical construction of subjectivity, of the controlling strength of discourses, of the diminution of the subject in the face of the limitless power of the signifier, the name of Blake is transmitted largely without 'difference' With other writers, increasingly we become coy, supply inverted commas, various kinds of parenthesis, the paraphernalia of erasure But the name-of-Blake has already, it seems, absorbed these conceptual and political niceties: the multivalent radicalism which is implicit in this name, for which the name is itself a sign, exempts critics of Blake from the alternations of doubt and anxiety which may afflict other, less privileged bands of apostles.

“Over here, under the sign of Blake, we take shelter behind the supposition that Blake himself, after all (and before all), knew the significant kinds of ‘Other’-ness, bracketed his own texts away from the tug of the obvious, and thus we are not called upon genuinely to deconstruct, rather to discover the principle and procedures of auto-deconstruction in the texts themselves.” [p. 83-84]

Punter goes on, but this extract suffices to give us the abstract essentials of his argument. Before I move on, let me do a little preliminary “deconstructing” of my own:

(1) Certain generalizations are made about the community of Blake critics, ie. the academic Blake industry. “We” does not include anyone outside of this circle, because how could a reader/thinker outside of the academic establishment know or understand anything a professor doesn’t know or understand? So the problems and deficiencies of Punter and his colleagues are “our” problems too, since outside of this circle (the text) nothing or no one exists.

(2) The body of Blake critics (academic colleagues) are passive admirers who defer to the authority of Blake himself to auto-deconstruct (interpret, based on Blake’s own criteria and methodology) his own texts, hence posit Blake as a perfect being who could not have been unconscious, unaware, prejudiced, or provincial about anything. Punter is going to rip the veil off this narcissistic (his term) practice and shatter critical orthodoxy, or so that is his pretension.

(3) Blake’s distinctive iconoclasm, philosophic depth, and self-consciousness are so outstanding that Blake defies the most vigorous attempts of the deconstructionists to destroy the author. Indeed this is the case, praise Bob, and so Punter is going to redouble his efforts so that he can be the one to assassinate the author once and for all.

(4) Blake, who might have been considered a man, an artist, a philosopher, is now become a signifier, a sign; he has been linguistified, textualized, to become now not a historical agent or even a set of ideas, but rather an array of tropes, a counter in the mental wars of signification.

I wait with bated breath to see what new and exciting take on Blake is forthcoming from Punter: it is gender (ho hum). We didn’t of course know until now that Blake was breadwinner of his eighteenth-century English family and that his own attitude toward women was inconsistent, did we?

“All these arguments bear the ineradicable traces of a supreme articulation of a system based on male dom-

inance, as indeed historically they must. As Hegel and Blake overthrow their fathers, and the reverberations of the struggle ... continue to echo through the system, so too they set up the revolt of the eldest son as the model for our critical discourse, and become available for invocation as the guarantors of a radicalism which is nonetheless marked not by a rejection but by specific and sophisticated incorporations of the ‘feminine.’” [p. 86]

Amidst this banality there is actually an interesting analysis a-brewing. Punter may be on to an interesting dynamic that characterizes the Romantic Age as a whole. The question would nonetheless remain as to the validity of Punter’s deep-philosophical comprehension and valuation of this phenomenon. He thinks he is striking a blow for feminism against patriarchy. Indeed, now that we are more self-conscious about these things than we were twenty years ago does not reduce whatever narcissism we possess; on the contrary, it has become easier to pose as being more progressive without having to make any real effort. I will not speak for the other Romantics, but as for Blake: if he feels that in a divided and perverted world the ‘feminine principle’ is as harmful and disgusting as the patriarchal principle, than perhaps he is more perspicacious, not less, than the yuppie feminists of today. As would befit a dialectical view of the world as a whole, Blake probably saw, his obvious shortcomings notwithstanding, that the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ principles were inseparable signs of the same coin. By all means, let us set up the contest between Blake and middle class feminism, and see who emerges victorious.

DECONSTRUCTING DAVID PUNTER – PART 2

Part 2 (Romanticism and history) concerns the sexual metaphors surrounding the French Revolution, on both the conservative and revolutionary side. From the viewpoint of the conservative Burke, for example, the revolution is likened to a sexual assault. There is an interesting diagram [p. 46] relating Englishness, Frenchness, the masculine, the feminine, self, adulthood, etc. (See also diagram on p. 48) There is the phallic English preoccupation with the “Oak”. The imagery of war, Wordsworth, and Keats are also discussed.

Part 3 (Romanticism and the self: an engagement with Blake) kicks off with the theme of the late eighteenth century preoccupation with relations between the sexes as violation of the female. Though authors of that time were critical of the dynamics of such relationships, they had no other basis upon which to base their thinking than woman as victim. Punter analyzes specific Blake texts – “Then she bore pale desire”, “How sweet I roam’d”,

and passages from “Visions of the daughters of Albion” – to show the same dynamic working in Blake. At first he does not go beyond mentioning the obvious problem with Blake – the issue of the “female will”. Instead, he highlights passages which show us how thoroughly Blake did criticize patriarchy and relate it to war, empire, and slavery, but nonetheless, according to Punter, deny human agency by leaving us with woman as object, as victim. It is an interesting and potentially significant point, but so far it is not a convincing testimony to Blake as preserver of patriarchy.

Then comes the section “The instituting of Blake”, which I flogged in the first installment of this critique. Then Punter claims that Blake’s prophetic books search for a way to reincorporate the feminine in a more just fraternal order after dismantling classical patriarchy. Urizen is too “unsophisticated in his refusal to work with the feminine”, but Los is the liberal, for whom “a degree of gender cooperation is possible” [p. 90]. (Hmmm, that sounds like the postmodern feminist liberal intellectual representatives of the managerial-administrative class to me.) Again, here is the germ of an interesting idea, but Punter is much too arbitrary and dogmatic in pursuing it. For Punter just flatly states that Blake is seeking to perfect the phallus as the single instrument of power. Then comes the postmodern fetish of the “gaze”, apparently another insidious ruse of masculine reason to render the world comprehensible. There is a lack of resolution in just what Punter is criticizing about Blake. It is one thing for Blake to be unresolved about the ultimate social order he wishes to create, it is another for the critic to be confused about what claims he is making. Every strand of a potentially interesting argument is lost in the arbitrary masturbatory play of deconstructive signification. Who then in the final analysis is the narcissist?

The female will re-enters the picture [p. 92]:

“Yet what is reinforced is the feminine as absence, the passivity of the Female Will, to be fructified by male insight, to be brought to life by masculine agency, as in a now familiar pattern of evasion to be referred back to the rage of womb envy.”

Though subjectivist narcissists cannot distinguish between symbols and realities, the critique of “sexist” symbolism does not automatically invalidate the real problem which the symbol symbolizes. If you don’t like the symbolic equation of the female with passivity, the negative, intellectual barrenness, etc., that does not make what is being criticized under that signifier one iota less valid, nor can the problem be summarily dismissed as womb

envy, the biggest evasion of all.

“For Blake and Hegel are the signs for the possibility of an ‘unnameable’ discourse; the dialectic is not restricted by boundaries of epistemology or by the rigid structures of a coherent science of knowledge. Here poetry, philosophy, narrative, drama are mixed into new forms forms which offer the coherence of narrative, the ego’s essential disguise” [p. 93]

Note how everything is reduced to self-referential textuality. Evidently, Blake and Hegel’s masculinist crime is that of maintaining that a coherent narrative or understanding of the world is still possible. This to Punter is narcissism. Funny, I thought that solipsistic subjectivism was narcissism.

I suggest the reader study these passages carefully; therein he (egads, I forgot that “she” is now the politically correct common sex pronoun) will uncover the fundament of the intellectual fraud perpetrated in this book. Note how dogmatic and absolutist is the gaze of this semiotic imperialism that imposes ITSELF on the text to the exclusion of other readings, especially those readings based on concerns with something other than discourse itself.

Blake’s critique of natural generation is not simply envy of the uncontrollable feminine Other, for however you symbolize it, this “uncontrollable” thing is not innocent and perfect in itself, some placid, harmonious utopia where the baby seal lies down in peace with the fish and the spotted owl with the worm; it is the realm of cruelty, slavery, domination, un-enlightenment, blindness – all those things that are beneath the human impulse to make the world a kind and intelligent place. Where man is not, nature is barren. Nature has no outline but imagination has. Praise Bob!

It will never occur to Punter, so grounded in anti-humanism as he is, that for his class of people the feminine in “feminism” is a symbolic coding of social fascism, of the de-animalized, mechanized, managerial class of state capitalism, the natural home of the Dworkins and Mackinnons of the world.

DECONSTRUCTING DAVID PUNTER – PART 3

Punter makes another interesting point: that the incessant generation of new voices in Blake’s prophetic books manifest an adaptability through which Blake can no longer be imprisoned in some final error; each voice is a seed of a new beginning. But this is where he takes it:

“Here also we hear a new attempt to implant a hope for the future, a future which will be in continuity with the past and thus whose ‘differance’ serves only as the essential guarantor of stasis and incorporation, a resistance to fantasy.” [p. 100]

Hope for the future – what a terrible thing. Blake stands accused of - gasp! - hoping for a revolution, or pretending to hope for one, as a disguise, so that nothing will fundamentally change. In other words, if you claim you want a revolution, you are faking, or just seeking to establish yourself as a new elite. How dare you have the gall to want to make a difference without a ‘differance’.

For Punter, the complexity of codes “in their very brilliance and metaphorical applicability, guarantee the fertility and historical adaptability of the masculine intellect.” [p. 100] Note how a priori is this assertion and the judgment it carries. The question becomes not one of genuine commitment to social equality (for women as for men), but of the cardinal crime according to postmodernist irrationalism: to dare claim that intellect can comprehend the objective world. The only struggle worth fighting is over codes, comprehensibility. The argument is directed against Blake’s very notion of discourse, of philosophy. How radically destructive of Blake this is, bespeaking a nihilism that goes beyond the simple recognition [p. 101] that Blake’s texts, however revolutionary, also paradoxically encode the traces of his society’s history and cultural biases (including patriarchal imagery). To whom is this news?

Punter leads nowhere, so instead of following him, better we should follow Blake, and give error a definite form so that it may be cast off forever.

Next comes the section “Blake and mysticism”, which starts out with this gem of banality.

“It is possible to consider much Blake criticism as appropriative that critics of a mystical persuasion have found Blake mystical; critics opposed to mysticism have found him down-to-earth, historically grounded Blake is a writer around whom criticism clusters, rather than against whom criticism takes up antagonistic stances.” [p. 101-2]

There follows a treatment of a number of different approaches to mysticism in various authors and texts. Punter belabors the question of mysticism and critical interpretation. He notes that Blake uses the word “mystic” twice only, as a pejorative [p. 103]. How to deal with Blake’s visions, caught between naming and the unname-

able? The answer is: intertextuality [p. 104].

On the question of ‘organised innocence’: how does one distinguish between non-supernatural transcendence and regression? “This doubt about regression is simultaneously a doubt about the authority we might have over the narratives the ego constructs ...” [p. 112] There is a question about the reflexivity of mysticism, which would be interesting indeed if the issue were not once again reduced to the only metaphysical category that matters for Punter – discourse. In this context, the most interesting question would be: if mystical insight grounds the authority of one’s claims, then how does it fit into the mystic’s overall epistemological system?

This is an especially important question if you insist on calling Blake a “mystic”. The school of criticism who identify Blake with traditional mysticism is thoroughly reactionary. Blake is not just a mystic, but he has a philosophical system of a totally different type; his dialectical world view is distinctively a product of the modern world. Blake’s “mysticism” is not mere vagueness; his symbolic process do not reduce to traditional mythical thinking; he has an epistemology, which comes through in his critique of empiricism.

The following section treats mysticism and psychosis, which segues into an assertion about Blake’s encoding of the problem of narrative and naming. That is where part 3 ends, without a resolution that I can perceive.

My summary here may seem grossly incomplete and disjointed, but it reflects the argumentative structure of the text itself, where strands of reasoning appear and disappear without ever being completed or woven together in a definitively clear pattern. I don’t read much literary criticism these days, but when I come across postmodernist approaches to the philosophical aspects of literary texts, why do I find that the writing is invariably obscure and incoherent, the argumentation badly constructed and leading nowhere?

DECONSTRUCTING DAVID PUNTER – PART 4 [CONCLUSION]

Part 4 (Romanticism and the unconscious) moves to the examination of the unconscious, with a focus on Gothic fiction in light of the psychoanalytic perspective of Melanie Klein (with some preliminary discussion of some doubts about Lacan). Featured works and authors include Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Edgar Allen Poe. Aside from a degrading treatment of Percy Shelley’s “Ode

to the West Wind”, there is not much objectionable in this chapter (– well, there is a little bit of BS discourse about Poe), but it has no apparent organic connection to the argument of the first three parts of the book.

Part 5 (Romanticism: some interpretations) wraps up the book. There is not much noteworthy in this conclusion other than the recapitulation of Part 4’s theme of the shattered body. However, we must underline the following assertion:

“It is the narcissistic impulse which continues to urge us to build systems.” [p. 168]

Here stands the arbitrariness of Punter’s metaphysical structure sanctioned by the pseudoscientific application of psychoanalysis. This assertion assumes that the mind has no legitimate business in trying to attain some objective understanding of the world. This core assumption is the root of the corruption which this whole book represents.

I have nothing to say on behalf of the Romantics collectively or individually, save that I take exception to the

misuse of the most profound of all of them – Blake. And Blake was militant about the obligation to engage in some mental pursuit that will contribute to the building up of Jerusalem: “The unproductive man is not a Christian.” Perhaps in 1977 when he was doing productive work on Blake’s imagery of labor, Punter would have taken this admonition seriously.

Overall, the book is a disappointment. While I will not deny that Punter might be on to something in finding imprints of narcissism and patriarchy in Romanticism, though he does bring his discussion down to earth with social data from time to time, he presents his thesis in an a priori manner, so that patriarchy and narcissism become free-floating abstractions, first principles of the disquisition rather than conclusions deduced from an all-round investigation of the dynamics of history and thought of the time. I believe that this is a direct consequence of the deconstructionist’s disdain for reason and objective truth, where the objective is to play with or smash systems of signifiers rather than to understand systems of concepts and discover the truth.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Ralph Dumain. Review of Punter, David, *The Romantic Unconscious: A Study in Narcissism and Patriarchy*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 1994.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9>

Copyright © 1994 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.