

WILLIAM BLAKE – POST-CLASSICIST



Recently I have been posting thoughts about the current state of Classical Studies, asking:

What might be done regarding the complicity of Classical Studies in ideological standpoints, including cultural chauvinism, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism?

I am much taken with dramatic techniques involving focus on characters and personae, avatars and ghosts, figuration and voices:

How might we create space for different voices?

The tactics I have found most useful in addressing these questions involve challenge and confrontation, facing down with discordant juxtaposition, precipitating friction through metaphor and allegory, actuality and synchronicity.

Allegory – [\[Link\]](#)

Synchronicity – [\[Link\]](#)

This has taken me to a discovery I made earlier this year about William Blake. I visited the big exhibition at Tate Britain [\[Link\]](#) in January and found it both spectacular and disappointing. It was comprehensive in presenting 300 works, but what struck me was a lack or absence, more accurately the presence of an absence – the extraordinary personal mythography and cosmography that Blake developed in and through his works, his world building. The exhibition did little to help us explore this component of his critical imagination.

Blake's is a strange world. Figures that seem biblical or classical or drawn from an unfamiliar folklore feature in allegorical dramas. They are set in a strange liminal antiquity that is coextensive with the streets of Blake's London and with newly emerging global geographies. Europe, the Americas, and Africa feature as personae, agencies in tension over their capacity to realize the emancipation of the human imagination. All this is realized in Blake's experiments with text and image, textuality and figuration, mark making and printing, the page and the codex.

My fascination led me to buy an encyclopaedic guide to this fabrication, a gazetteer and *dramatis personae* – S. Foster Damon's *Blake Dictionary* [\[Link\]](#).

I came across an annotated drawing/engraving of the Laocoon a long while ago. I used it in my book *Classical Archaeology of Greece* [\[Link\]](#). It's only now that I'm realizing how it is such an expression of Blake's extraordinary radicalism.

This is Blake as a post-Classicist, reframing (literally in his graphics),

reworking the Classical through juxtapositions that still appear radically incongruent.



In the annotations we read fragments of flights of displacement, dislocation that

take us far from the orthodox commentary on iconography and style. Such work of the critical imagination contrasts with Blake's treatment of Newton – the failure of his *Principia* to reduce the world to rational, reasoned order and system.



See Irene Tayler on the annotated engraving – [\[Link\]](#) – in Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly.

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