Meeting the Author/
Facing the Book

William Blake lures his readers into sympathy for the weak, the hampered, the outcast, and then shocks us by switching to a mode of retributive savagery. Or he campaigns against secrecy and militarism and then suddenly appears to be the very personification of harboured malice and egotistical disharmony. Charles Dickens puts forward young individuals, sometimes implicitly based upon himself, as the heroes of his novels, but then mocks and undermines them, moving to ever more rigorous analyses of social compulsion and psychological bondage, so that the notion of a self-determining, benevolent subject is made more and more problematic. And James Joyce, for all that Ulysses may end with a 'Yes', does not, any more than Blake or Dickens, attach an unequivocally optimistic or consoling ending to the system of moral confusion, pity and hostility which he has evoked. Stephen may have found Bloom, as the novel comes to a close, and vice versa – or not, as the case may be – and Bloom may or may not be back on good terms with Molly, but a sense has emerged of a world full of crises and disasters, far beyond the empathetic resources of the most benevolently disposed individual, and quite possibly immune to the ministrations of art. And, somewhere in Dublin, Joyce's blighted and rejected alter ego, Dedalus's dead alias, the poor blind stripling, is still tapping dismally, foul-temperedly, along. In each of these cases the reader is drawn into areas of pressing ethical concern by the author, but at the same time confronted with intimations of that same author's possible irresponsibility, indifference, or positive malevolence.

My principal aim in this book, I believe, is to propagate a sense of the ethical significance of literature which opposes some forms of poststructuralist scepticism but which, unlike more conventional humanistic approaches, is not reductive or platitudinous. To a certain extent, my approach participates in recent trends in Blake studies Dickens studies, Joyce studies and critical practice in general, and I have drawn attention, throughout, to points at which my argument overlaps with or has been partially anticipated by other critics who are sensitive to ethical problems raised by the works of

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my three chosen authors. This is especially the case with Blake, who, of late, has very frequently been discussed as a systematic philosophical thinker whose work can teach the reader valuable lessons about life. Often Blake is described as achieving this significance through a kind of undermining or problematizing of his authorial status. According to Andrew M. Cooper, for example,

Increasingly, Blake’s mythological universe comprises the author’s internalized mental representations of the world, their shaping influence on his actions, and in turn the world’s responses to those actions as perceived by him through the filter of his representations. So far from appearing *in propria persona* as the bard who present, past, and future sees, Blake comes to look more like a Foucauldian ‘author function,’ a locus of contestatory social-historical forces of which his ‘proper person’ is only one constituent among many.

...Only by recognizing the ways in which subjectivity has become implicated in the systems of knowledge, power, and ideology that supply its consciousness and reinforce its ‘subject’ status can Blake develop an ethics of resistance – namely, ‘self-annihilation’ both as an article of religious belief and a means of aesthetic production – and so approach an at least provisionally authentic self.¹

What I have to add to this rarefied account of the exemplary crisis of selfhood, authorship and authority in Blake is a reaffirmation of the ethically provocative concreteness of the depictions of human joy and suffering in his works, coupled with Blake’s implication of versions of himself, within these texts, in actions and attitudes which he otherwise abhors. In other words, I wish to emphasize the ways in which Blake consistently links sophisticated ontological doubts to a sense of moral crisis in the outside world, thus prompting readers to re-evaluate their attitudes to the inequities and sufferings around them with real urgency. Thus, I must question the meaningfulness of Cooper’s ‘provisionally authentic’, and would argue that this picture of Blake approaching a provisional state calls for a less upbeat conclusion than that with which Cooper rounds off his essay.

Stephen Cox, another critic who has recently commented on Blake’s achievement of philosophical usefulness through a kind of self-abnegation, concludes his major study thus: