Religion in the Age of Enlightenment

Volume 5 Article 22

2015

# Re-Envisioning Blake: Book Review

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# *Re-Envisioning Blake*

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Born out of a conference commemorating its subject's 250th birthday, *Re-Envisioning Blake* surveys the state of contemporary Blake scholarship and invites new and challenging readings of one of British literary history's most renowned iconoclasts. The book's introduction reviews three principal strains in Blake studies—the bibliographic, the hermeneutical, and the historicist—and seeks to locate points of convergence, sites of overlap, in order to imagine not just the future of Blake studies but the future of literary studies as well.

Although the editors take a suitably Blakean synthetic approach, some of the essays collected here do appear to advocate the importance, if not the superiority, of their own methodologies. For instance, Keri Davies and David Worrall argue that much work done on William Blake suffers from an ill-founded reliance on the poet's status as a Dissenter. Arguing for the inaccuracy of this assumption, these critics provide an alternate religious history for Blake rooted in his mother's temporary but noteworthy membership in the Moravian Church—a thread explored more deeply by Craig Atwood, who, like Davies and Worrall, suggests that Blake's rejection of Christianity may have been, in fact, an embrace of the female principal typical of Moravian worship. This conclusion, based in part on their own archival efforts, the archival efforts of M. K. Schuchard, and their own retranslation and reappraisal

of an article on Blake written by Henry Crabbe Robinson, produces a convincing and perhaps much-needed corrective to what critics take for granted as Blake's renunciation of Christian orthodoxy. Meanwhile, these efforts contribute to the body of the work, striving toward the enrichment of cultural history rather than textual interpretation. In this way, much of *Re-Envisioning Blake* is actually a re-envisioning of Blake's contexts.

Alongside Davies and Worrall, Mark Crosby and Angus Whitehead work in a decidedly historicist mode. As a result, their earnest recuperation of Catherine Blake devotes less attention to close reading of one of her surviving paintings than it does to close readings of secondhand accounts of how well Catherine Blake assisted her husband, although apparently she was "hardly a passive creature" (90). Even now, Blake's mother and his wife, one concludes, remain accessible to us exclusively through church records and the hearsay of those who knew them rather than by what they may have said or may have written about themselves. Whether this misfortune results simply from a lack of available evidence or from a lack of looking for such evidence remains unclear, but in the generative spirit of its project, the book welcomes and even demands further inquiry into the lives of these women whose impact on Blake bears so much significance.

Separate from the strain that galvanizes the discussion of Blake's historical moment is the strain that positions Blake against our own historical moment. Shirley Dent explores the appropriation of Blake's "Jerusalem" by extreme political groups, progressive and conservative alike. She begins with lines of thinking descended from Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, but also includes a counterintuitive attachment to the poem on the part of fascists. In so doing, Dent takes stock of Blake's position in the popular imagination and dramatizes the implications of misreading. Dent's most impressive contribution, however, concerns her recommendation that Blake scholars attempt to account for the potentially troubling malleability and susceptibility of Blake's verses and to "look again at the neutrality of Blake's myth-making in the stories told, retold, and reinvented about England" (62). Like all the best essays in this volume, Dent's essay concludes with a clear sense of

concerns yet to be satisfied and, more to the point, a clear sense of critics' responsibility to address these contentions.

John Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson supply careful treatments of Blake's paintings and thereby deepen and widen the book's scope. After the historicist-heavy chapters, the formalist approaches these critics take provide opportunities for the reader to participate in intimate interaction with the art itself. Better still, without doing so explicitly, Johnson's investigation into Blake's depictions of the death and ascent of the Virgin Mary actually lends greater credibility and complexity to the chapters that trace potential Moravian influence on Blake's life and work.

Whereas the book's introduction strikes a hopeful tone, the afterword strikes an apologetic one. Focusing on the humanity—and, therefore, on the fallibility—animating editorial decisions, Morris Eaves's closing remarks appear to beg for a margin of error, a margin necessary in part because of "how much Blake has already been deleted from the record" (226). But laying aside the inevitable loss or downright inscrutability of primary sources, it is difficult to understand what the afterword offers other than a rather gloomy nod toward the impermanence of the very material editors labor to preserve and disseminate.

Ultimately, *Re-Envisioning Blake* emerges as a readable collection of essays that attains its aspirations—to invigorate the immediate present as a locus of fruitful reading and thinking dedicated to Blake and to propose that the future of Blake studies resides in a fusion of the methods that have brought Blake studies this far.

Crosby, Mark, Troy Patenaude, and Angus Whitehead. *Re-Envisioning Blake*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 262.