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Nicholas M. Williams, ed., *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*

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Nicholas M. Williams, ed. *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xii + 283 pp. £65.00/\$115.00, hardcover; £19.99/\$42.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Jason Whittaker

THE Palgrave Advances series is intended to outline the boundaries of a discipline for students and new scholars. *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, edited by Nicholas M. Williams (author of the excellent *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*), offers a fairly comprehensive view of critical approaches to Blake in the early twenty-first century. In contrast to other introductory guides, such as the 2003 *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, this collection of essays emphasizes metacritical approaches rather than introducing Blake's life and work, and is arranged into two main sections dealing with textual and cultural approaches.

Williams's introduction reviews the critical reception of Blake in the century following his death, noting how the relative lack of contemporary attention contrasts remarkably with the widespread appreciation and enthusiasm that flourished from the late nineteenth century onwards. The summary of nineteenth-century reception, providing a generous critical appraisal of Gilchrist and Swinburne in particular, while noting the significance of Yeats and Ellis in systematizing Blake (important for him to be taken "seriously" as a thinker in the early twentieth century, for all that it distorted his views), covers familiar ground very ably. With the exception of Colin Trodd's forthcoming book on Blake and Victorian art (to be published in 2011 as *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830-1930*), the responses to Blake in the Victorian literary sphere were largely mapped out by Deborah Dorfman's *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (1969) and G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (1975). Yet it was during the twentieth century that the appreciation of Blake exploded, and this is where Williams's summary is less effective: to be fair, the limits of an introductory essay restrict what he is able to write, and it is perfectly reasonable for him to concentrate on the period of 1900 to 1954 as that time when the foundations of subsequent Blake scholarship were laid. Although his contrast of Blakean systematizers and historicists is perhaps a little too neat, there is some truth in this categorization.

The first chapter of the section devoted to textual approaches, John H. Jones's "Blake's Production Methods," is one of the better introductions to this subject for the general reader that I have encountered. Although it is not as expert as Joseph Viscomi's account in the *Cambridge Companion* in terms of

describing how Blake worked to produce his copperplates, it does offer a succinct account of reproduction innovations that were taking place during the late eighteenth century, such as aquatint and mezzotint. Jones also provides a careful outline of some of the recent scholarly controversies surrounding those production methods, particularly those between Phillips and Essick/Viscomi over whether Blake used a one- or two-pull process; after considering the available evidence presented by these scholars, as well as historical precedents, he settles in favor of Essick and Viscomi. One fault with the Palgrave collection is that after this excellent chapter, the attention paid to the material culture of Blake's work is rather brief, although the following chapter by Peter Otto, "Blake's Composite Art" (Hagstrum's notable phrase, popularized by Mitchell), goes some way to returning focus to that material culture which has been so important in much recent scholarly work within Blake studies. The account of the debate among Hagstrum, Mitchell, and De Luca is, again, useful and particularly interesting in terms of some of the slightly more recent interventions (for example, Mitchell's ideas around "chaosthetics"),¹ although a degree of tension emerges when Otto moves from this summary to his own reading of *There is No Natural Religion*. By concentrating on how this particular tract offers a critique of Newton's and Locke's empiricism, Otto provides a sophisticated example of reading Blake's work, and yet I found myself frustrated by this focus on Blake's early, experimental, and minor text. The vigor with which Otto turns to plate 62 of *Jerusalem*, which depicts a giant head and feet framing a strangely corporeal slab of text, makes me wish that he had chosen from Blake's varied corpus of illuminated printing a few more vivid examples that could more clearly demonstrate dramatic visionary forms as well as composite art.

Textual approaches continue with Angela Esterhammer on "Blake and Language" and Nelson Hilton on Blake's textuality. Each is a masterly summary, with Esterhammer offering an account that provides considerable insight into theoretical linguistic speculations that have been inspired by Blake's poetry, notably in the work of Essick and De Luca (who also features strongly in Hilton's essay and has a not inconsiderable role to play throughout the whole collection). Although their approaches and aims are different, it is tempting to compare these two essays with Susan Wolfson's on Blake's poetic language and form in the *Cambridge Companion*. Esterhammer concentrates in considerably more detail on critical responses to Blake, while Hilton pays more attention to the texture of Blake's words as the product of illuminated printing, emphasizing that material condition of the words insofar as it can transform the presentation and meaning of Blake's books. However, while both essays, particularly when taken together, are a much stronger approach to Blake's language than that provided by Wolfson's close readings, the inclusion of both of

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Chaosthetics: Blake's Sense of Form," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58.3-4 (1995): 441-58.

them does point to probably the most serious flaw in *William Blake Studies* as a whole: Blake the poet, the writer, and, to a lesser extent, the printmaker of illuminated books is much stronger in the collection than Blake the artist, the painter, the engraver. At least one chapter dedicated to Blake's visual arts along the lines, for example, of Martin Myrone's accessible and informative study of Blake's art, *The Blake Book* (2007), would have greatly improved the collection.

By contrast, the second part of *William Blake Studies*, dealing with cultural approaches, is comprehensive in its judicious selection of topics, with chapters by Helen Bruder, David Punter, Saree Makdisi, and Mark Lussier on subjects ranging from Blake and gender studies to the appropriation of Blake as a metaphor for contemporary scientific ideas.

In some respects, the most important chapter is that by Stephen Prickett and Christopher Strathman on "Blake and the Bible"—important because Blake's relationship to biblical motifs and religious ideas, so evident within his art and writing, is often neglected by Blake critics. Prickett and Strathman obviously do not deal with the considerable amount of material that has come to the fore very recently with regard to the possible relations of Blake with Moravian ideas. Nonetheless, this chapter offers an extremely good starting point for considerations of some of Blake's readings of Milton, as well as the Deist controversy surrounding Paine's publication of *The Age of Reason* in the 1790s. The discussion of Blake's rejection of both Paine's Deism and Bishop Watson's naturalism in favor of the new biblical criticism that was beginning to emerge in Germany in particular, and which may have been available to Blake via writers such as Alexander Geddes, is finely nuanced.

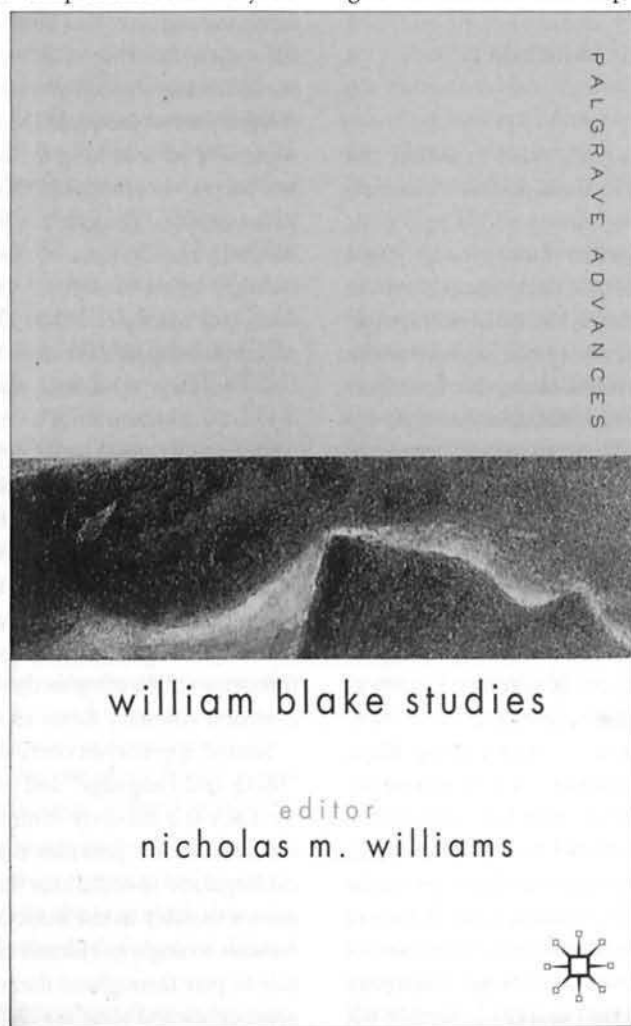
Although it does not follow "Blake and the Bible," Andrew Lincoln's chapter on "Blake and the History of Radicalism" is in many respects a useful companion piece to the Prickett-Strathman essay. As well as considering the appreciation of Blake's radical politics by critics from Jacob Bronowski and Mark Schorer to David Worrall, Jon Mee, and Makdisi via, of course, the magisterial work of David Erdman, Lincoln pays considerable attention to the radical religious dissenting and antinomian traditions in which such politics frequently op-

erated during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lincoln's chapter and that which follows, Makdisi on "Blake and the Communist Tradition," obviously strongly complement each other. As with the essays by Hilton and Esterhammer, there is inevitably some overlap, although Makdisi concentrates on some of the wider political contexts for Blake studies, notably Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers. Neither Lincoln nor Makdisi considers alternative traditions of later communist thinking that, with their origins in Diggers and Ranters and inspired by later revolutionaries such

as Kropotkin, espoused a view of anti-authoritarian communism that often appears closer to Blake than Marxism does. Indeed, many of those figures, such as William Morris and Herbert Read, made explicit their appreciation of Blake in a way that simply does not apply to Marx, for whom Blake would have surely appeared suspiciously idealistic.

Of the remaining chapters, Bruder's on "Blake and Gender Studies" and Punter's on "Blake and Psychology" follow on from each other, with Bruder's being the much wider ranging and more assured of the two. Part of this stems from the fact that Blake and gender has been a much more active topic since the late nineties than those psychological readings, particularly Jungian, which informed a glut of texts from the sixties to the eighties. (Interestingly, R. D. Laing, one of the only major thinkers to work in the psychiatric field who specifically

refers to Blake, is omitted from Blake studies almost certainly because of the many flaws of his anti-psychiatry, yet this is explicitly to neglect a trend in twentieth-century psychology where Blake, for better or for worse, appears to have had a significant influence.) Punter's contribution, with the exception of some discussion of Ronald Britton, reads a little like a historical dead end in terms of Blake studies, and if there is to be any future in this field it probably lies with the schizoanalytic studies of Deleuze and Guattari. By contrast, it was only toward the end of the twentieth century that gender studies, particularly when extended to encompass queer theory and studies of masculinity, began to play a more pronounced role in the analysis of Blake, making Bruder's chapter a particularly vivid read.



Two other contributions, Lussier on “Blake and Science Studies” and Edward Larrissy on “Blake and Postmodernism,” share a few conceptual boundaries, particularly with regard to Lussier’s discussion of Blake’s role within contemporary physics. Lussier’s carefully argued essay, which rightly emphasizes the important contributions of Donald Ault, leads the reader through a sophisticated reading of Blake’s critique of the mechanistic materialism of his day to the ways in which his visionary poetics, particularly in “Auguries of Innocence,” is “capable of imaging for lay person and scientist alike the quirkiness resident in relativity and quantum” (206-07). Larrissy’s chapter, which concludes the volume, draws upon some of the material dealt with at much greater length in his *Blake and Modern Literature* (2006). As such, in a necessarily brief form, it provides some insight into the next stage of reception that is implied in Williams’s introduction to the collection, blurring the boundaries of responses to Blake’s works to consider creative and artistic as well as critical and scholarly reactions. This final chapter is considerably different from many that precede it in that significant activity in reception studies of this kind has, with one or two exceptions such as work on Blake in the Victorian period, only really begun in the past decade.

This collection provides a fresh perspective by concentrating on the critical discourse that has built up within Blake studies over the past four to five decades in particular. The primary aim of *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies* is, of course, to summarize and synthesize contemporary scholarly work, but it does not refrain from making suggestions for further development, for example a return to studying the relations between Blake and science, or further examination of posthumous reception. Those new (or relatively new) to Blake studies will be provided with a good grounding in the scholarly field. Inevitably, those with a stronger sense of that scholarship will find a number of criticisms to make, of which two are in my opinion most important. The lesser is that perhaps a little more attention could have been paid to the effect of not only Blake’s production techniques but also the impact of subsequent reproductive technologies, notably the *Blake Archive*, on the reception and understanding of what is a unique corpus of composite art. This leads to the second, much more substantial criticism, which is that Blake the artist is almost entirely absent from this collection, *William Blake Studies* being much more concerned with Blake the poet, writer, and printer of illuminated texts.



1. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy D (1795), pl. 24 (Library of Congress). Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

MINUTE PARTICULAR

Blake’s Design of Nebuchadnezzar

BY PAUL MINER

ONE of William Blake’s most enigmatic designs relates to his figure of Nebuchadnezzar in plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, c. 1790 (illus. 1). Although several graphic sources may have influenced Blake’s conception of Nebuchadnezzar,¹ a suggestion of more than 130 years ago,

1. Martin Butlin calls attention to Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of “The Penance of St. John Chrysostomus” in *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) #301, pl. 393. Anthony Blunt in “Blake’s Pictorial Imagination,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): illus. 60b, points to a werewolf woodcut by Lucas Cranach. Additionally, Kenneth Clark, *The Romantic*