

Michael Phillips, ed., with the assistance of Catherine de Bourgoing. *William Blake (1757-1827): Le Génie visionnaire du romantisme anglais*. Paris: Paris-Musées, 2009. 256 pp. €39, hardcover.

Reviewed by Philippa Simpson

THE title of the 2009 Petit Palais exhibition and its accompanying catalogue offers an extraordinarily loaded and complex epithet: “The Visionary Genius of English Romanticism.” Both the show and the book, an illustrated collection of essays and other reactions written in or translated into French, were clearly shaped by the need to (re)introduce Blake to a French audience. As is pointed out more than once in the book, there had been no major exhibition of Blake’s art in the country since 1947. Indeed, for the second half of the twentieth century Blake’s reputation had rested largely on his writings, which were repeatedly translated, and were championed by a number of French cultural heroes, including Pierre Berger and André Gide. At the Petit Palais, by reuniting series of drawings, prints, and paintings, attention was focused instead upon the processes involved in Blake’s image-making and his role as a visual artist, not to overturn but to augment the received perception of him as a writer.

Initially the text seems not only to support but to develop these aims. Following Daniel Marchesseau’s overview of Blake’s place in the French cultural consciousness—a necessary act of reflection that prepares the ground for further interrogation of his work—comes a piece of poetic prose by Yves Bonnefoy. When confronted with this dynamic personal response, we may suspect that the aim of the catalogue is to eulogize Blake rather than to examine his works with any critical rigor, but this would be a false impression. Coming directly after Bonnefoy’s lyrical descriptions, Michael Phillips’s précis of Blake’s career offers a revealing counterpoint in its clear and authoritative outline of the social, historical, and cultural conditions under which Blake created his works. It soon becomes apparent that it was wise to insert this more conventional introductory essay after Bonnefoy’s more subjective interpretative text. The two essays are delicately balanced, and illustrate nicely the difficulties involved in staging any exhibition of Blake’s work. Phillips’s intricate technical knowledge complements and enriches Bonnefoy’s more emotive portrait of the artist, adding a sense of wonder at Blake’s practical innovation to an admiration of his imagination. Furthermore, by reminding the reader of the laborious process of mediation between the conception of the artist and the production of the work, Phillips challenges the notion of a vision-

ary experience directly recorded, without diminishing in any way the reputation of the artist.

Parallels between Blake’s philosophies and his techniques are suggested, laying a constructive foundation for new viewers to reflect upon these correspondences in the diverse works on display. The correspondence between the act of cutting or biting into the plate and Blake’s notion of man’s innate knowledge is used to illustrate the intimate connection between his practice and his attitude towards the rationalist theories of Locke and Newton. Phillips deals with the allegorical nature of Blake’s techniques most evocatively, however, in relation to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Describing with great delicacy the process of printing these poems, he suggests that the transparent quality of the medium allowed reflected light to shine through from the paper beneath, recalling the notion of the divine image in man, and lending a new meaning to the phrase “illuminated printing.”

Occasionally Phillips’s descriptions of Blake’s radical innovations in printmaking are oversimplified, and succumb to the myth of the artist as an isolated genius, born before his time. But in general, by locating precedents for Blake’s images, emphasizing the sheer industry involved in their construction, and outlining the pressures—artistic and financial—experienced by the artist, Phillips provides the viewer with a contextual framework that is enabling rather than restrictive.

This, though, is where the catalogue begins to lose its way as a means of introducing these works by Blake to the French. The text might easily have been confined to something like these first three essays, within which much of the information in the later material might have been incorporated (Céline Mansanti’s useful survey of Blake’s reception in France, for example, or David Steel’s work on Blake and André Gide). It would then have been sufficient simply to reproduce all the exhibited works, dividing these into smaller isolated series, tracing a broad overarching narrative of Blake’s career as seen in the exhibition itself. This would have given a clearer shape and identity to the catalogue as a whole, by virtue of both a loose chronology and at least an element of visual and thematic structure. Instead, there are twenty-six short essays, ranging from around 1500 to 3000 words, each focusing tightly on one issue—esthetic, contextual, iconographic—relating to Blake’s practice. With so great a range of authors and subjects some repetition is inevitable, but it is hard to excuse the large overlaps among several of the essays. Most striking, and unfortunate, are the echoes between Phillips’s introduction and the text by Martin Butlin that immediately succeeds it, but these are only the first of many. By the third description of Blake’s visit to Westminster Abbey, the reader could be forgiven for skimming the remaining twenty or so entries.

This is not to say that the texts are uninteresting. Many of the themes are well selected and the writing is often illuminating, helping to contextualize Blake’s work without simply inserting it into conventional histories. Bethan Stevens, for example, provides a sophisticated analysis of *Visions of the Daughters*

of *Albion* in relation to the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft and the analogies she draws between slavery and marriage. Although alert to the points of disagreement between Blake and Wollstonecraft, who occupied quite distinct positions on the matter of sexual liberation, Stevens provides a fascinating exploration of Blake's unorthodox belief that slavery caused suffering not only to those enslaved but to their masters. Via a close reading of Blake's treatment of the body and the language employed by Wollstonecraft, Stevens constructs a forceful argument for reevaluating *Visions* in light of late-eighteenth-century politics, both domestic and international.

The complexity of Blake's political and cultural positioning is further drawn out in Saree Makdisi's fascinating examination of the concepts of unity and difference and David Fuller's essay on the *Divine Comedy* images, while the intricate webbing of patronage, heritage, and homage is sensitively examined by Andrew Loukes in reference to Blake's portraits of poets. Other authors offer evidence of Blake's engagement with cultural trends, in particular Jared Richman, who considers the wide popularity of Milton's poetry and Blake's peculiarly biographical interest in him. This approach is developed by Martin Myrone, who skillfully situates Blake's interest in the supernatural and the sublime in the context of a contemporary vogue for the Gothic, while insisting upon the particularity of his practice. There is also a welcome passage on Blake's immediate predecessors by William Pressly, in which the artist is seen as the legatee of a specifically British tradition.

This theme of national heritage is also treated by Robin Simon in his discussion of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Simon interprets Blake's engagement with familiar symbols of British identity as a means by which the artist introduced the quotidian or colloquial into a visionary language, by adopting the informal idiom of Wordsworth, or through reference to the game of cricket. Although the implication that a sense of national pride can be found in Blake's work is unconvincing, Simon offers an interesting consideration of Blake's aesthetic choices and the way in which they embodied a rejection of Reynolds's theories of art.

Simon's close reading of Blake's pictures, however, is an exception which points up one of the problems of the catalogue: the concentration upon Blake's writing. While Simon and some others tackle Blake's symbolic visual imagery, a large number of the essays, among them some of the most engaging, are entirely dedicated to the poems, or gesture towards the images only as illustrations. Naturally, a great deal of explanation and interpretation is needed in introducing a non-English-speaking audience to Blake as an author. While it may be of great interest to consider the effect of translating Blake's work into French, or the prophetic nature (or otherwise) of *Europe* and *America*, it is arguable, however, whether this is the place to do so. This is not to demand a strict separation of text from image, which would be contrary to the nature of the works themselves; when faced with so vast a subject it may perhaps have been more helpful to have limited discussion to

the objects on display, of which there were more than enough to furnish a rich investigation of Blake's career.

This in turn flags another, and perhaps more serious, flaw: the inadequate and incoherent use of illustrations. Images are referred to throughout by catalogue number, which (as not all objects in the show are reproduced) leaves the reader searching through pictures that are not in numerical order, and are rarely positioned in clear relation to the text. This is compounded by inconsistency, when Martin Butlin (uniquely) decides to employ the numbering system from his catalogue *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* in order to direct readers to relevant (but unexhibited) works. With so varied a selection of themes, and very little clear structure to their arrangement, this added confusion is particularly keenly felt.

Furthermore, the texts are too short to deal with their subjects adequately, and too often the writers seem to have been trapped into oversimplification, as in the case of David Alexander, who discusses Blake's relationships with his patrons with no critical look at the artist's investment in establishing a reputation as romantic outsider, or Elizabeth C. Denlinger, whose study of Catherine Blake reads as an unsatisfactorily token gesture towards a forgotten partner. In essence, while the questions raised by the catalogue are apposite, and many essays introduce themes that have not been dealt with in the French literature on Blake, it might have been more productive to have limited the overall length of the text and included a fuller bibliography for those who wanted to explore further. This would then have provided the space for what would really have stimulated an enthusiasm for Blake's pictures: high-quality reproductions of the works themselves, clearly arranged to allow for comparison and cross-referencing. Without these, the catalogue can only help to reinforce the notion that Blake's true achievement was literary, and his images merely illustrative or incidental.

Magnus Ankarsjö. *William Blake and Religion: A New Critical View*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009. viii + 163 pp. \$39.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Christopher Rowland

THIS concise study of Blake's religion starts from the recent work done on Blake's Moravian background and the possible overlaps between Moravianism and Swedenborgianism. In the process, it seeks to elucidate what is meant by Blake's radicalism, which, as the author points out, is a very slippery concept. The book starts with a rejection of E. P. Thompson's theory that Blake's mother was a Muggle-