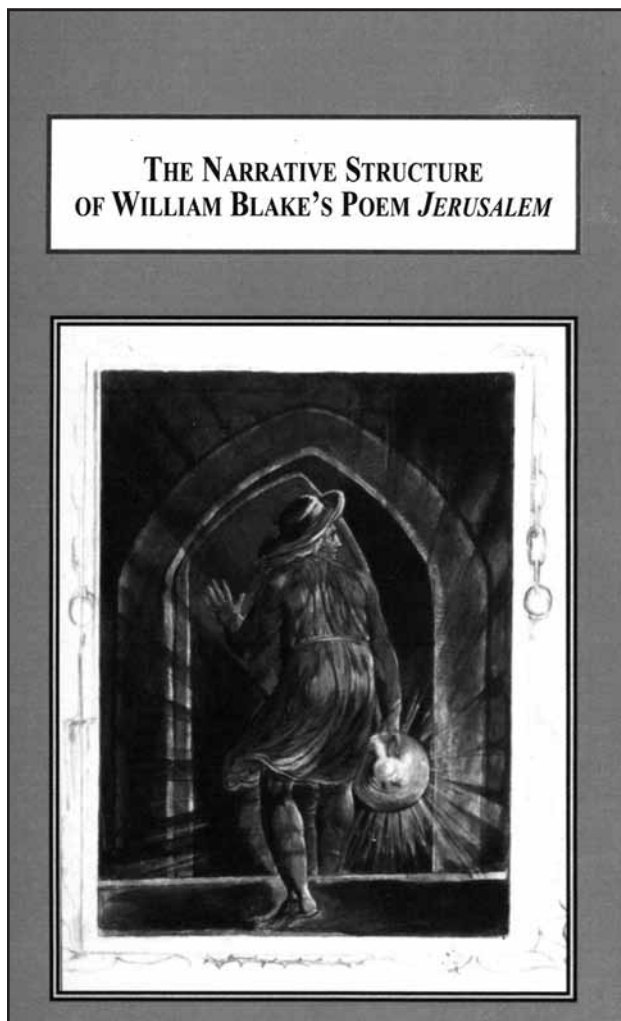


support that claim. It should be read for its clear explanation of the core of *Jerusalem* and its compelling demonstration of the reasons why Blake shaped his poem the way that he did.

The book has some weaknesses: for experienced Blake scholars, the long reprise of the “synchronic” school may be tedious and even argumentative, even though Yoder is at pains to delineate critical differences (which may make it particularly useful for students). The third chapter could benefit from more examples of extended readings. In citing parts of the text that exemplify one or another point, he doesn’t offer expanded interpretations. But these are minor complaints in the context of the very important work that this book represents. After my first reading, I wished that Yoder had gone on to write a comprehensive explication of the poem in sequence and in detail, as Donald Ault has done for *The Four Zoas* in *Narrative Unbound*. But on a second reading, I was well satisfied that Yoder’s explanation of the poem’s unique enterprise, special techniques, and inspiring philosophy offers an indispensable introduction to *Jerusalem*.



James Rovira. *Blake and Kierkegaard: Creation and Anxiety*. London: Continuum, 2010. x + 184 pp. £60.00/\$110.00, hardcover; £24.99/\$44.95, paperback (2011).

Reviewed by Kathryn Freeman

IN *Blake and Kierkegaard: Creation and Anxiety*, James Rovira explores historical synchronicities to mine the potential for like-mindedness between Blake and Kierkegaard. He introduces a compelling rationale for bringing the two writers together: “Neither author is concerned with history as such but rather with the phenomenological profile that historical forces hold for the individual subject” (3). This distinction between “history as such” and the subject’s intersection with history as a “phenomenological” experience is an improvement over previous studies of these writers that separate history and subjectivity.

Just as this synthesis of history and subjectivity offers a rethinking of Blake and of Kierkegaard, Rovira’s revision of Derridean deconstruction from the hindsight of new historicism challenges the assumption of mutual exclusion between the two theoretical positions. More relevant for the study itself, this strategy has the potential to prevent the argument from being limited to mere synchronicity. Yet it is more persuasive regarding Kierkegaard than for Blake: Rovira negotiates the atemporality of deconstruction via the observation that “Kierkegaardian anxiety is not a textual movement but an emotional one, an individual experience registered in literature but embedded within historical, cultural, social, and personal particularities,” which provides the basis for the study’s focus on Kierkegaard’s “understand[ing] individuality to exist in a continual dialectic with history and society” (4). Attributing the same impulse to Blake’s texts is less convincing, however. Applying deconstruction, even in tandem with new historicism, in reading Blake’s texts or designs is problematic for reasons Paul de Man first articulated: Blake’s “privileging of writing” makes it “less resistant” to deconstruction, a remark that seems truer to the more complex erasures and re-creations in Blake’s cosmology; incorporating the historical dimension does not resolve but rather evades this fundamental problem.¹

The potential for reductiveness is a danger for any comparison between writers, but it is more so between a philosopher and a writer-artist as multifaceted as Blake. By premising the argument on the assumption that “their works are a record

1. The quotation is from an interview with W. J. T. Mitchell in his essay “Visible Language: Blake’s Wondrous Art of Writing,” *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 91.

of psychological development and struggle,” Rovira’s study sacrifices the idiosyncrasies of Blake’s cosmology, particularly its elasticity, in a rigid paradigm of abstract categories more suitable for analyzing systematic philosophy (3). More problematic than the claim that the binaries—science vs. religion, nature vs. artifice, and democracy vs. monarchy—exist within texts is Rovira’s assertion that Blake and Kierkegaard represent, if not precisely two polarities, two sides of the study’s central binary, “creation and anxiety”: “Blake’s mythology represents the ‘creation’ and Kierkegaard’s philosophy the ‘anxiety’ of creation anxiety” (2).

The organizational choice of shuttling between the writers via these binaries keeps the argument broad and shallow. Thus, for instance, the second chapter studies Blake and Kierkegaard vis-à-vis the Socratic tradition, as “both drew from a centuries-old classical model of personality,” a broad claim that prevents the possibility of exploring Blake’s particularly complex relationship not only to the classical but the neoclassical (36). Rovira asserts that Blake condemns nature in “A Vision of the Last Judgment” (48), but it is a text that works against dualities: its concluding remark, “I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it” (E 566), subverts Rovira’s implicit binary of commendation vs. condemnation. Later in the chapter, he offers a far more nuanced reading of Blake’s “ambivalence toward Plato” that suggests the need not only to revise the earlier statement, but to consider the deeper implications of subject-object duality at the heart of the comparison between the two writers (49). When the study does move away from the “x vs. y” formula, it makes room for such complexities as the notion of inwardness at the end of the third chapter.

That the book’s breadth jeopardizes depth is a problem not only based on the multiplicity of binaries, but on the choice to devote large sections of the study to background information, much of which could have been relegated to endnotes. Similarly, the treatment of criticism in some cases is an undigested compilation; at other times it generalizes about critical approaches based on one or two studies. Rovira connects creation anxiety to Blake’s concept of Generation and by extension to gender and sexuality. However, in his discussion of *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he collapses forty years of feminist criticism on Blake to a single 1977 study (75). The treatment of gender and sexuality in these poems founders still more as Rovira makes “a brief excursion” into “The Tyger,” a pattern of digression repeated with loosely connected “excursions” into texts by other authors. At the beginning of chapter 4, for example, and at several other points, *Frankenstein* is brought in to represent narratives of creation anxiety, yet the discussion is so fleeting that it raises many unaddressed questions about how creation anxiety in Shelley’s novel compares to that in Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings or Blake’s poetry and designs. Since addressing these

questions would be tangential to the thesis, a better choice might have been to relegate such references to endnotes.

Besides the largely unassimilated quarry of historical information and critical perspectives, and the plethora of undeveloped topics, a need to control the unwieldiness of the book is evident even at the level of syntax, as exemplified by the sentence, “This dichotomy in Blake’s artistic output encouraged in Blake’s mind a dichotomy between Blake the commercial engraver and Blake the visionary artist, the former subject to the power of a spectrous fiend while the latter is emancipated and visionary” (54). In the case of a passage analyzing the two writers with regard to the classical model of personality, so many claims are made in a single sentence that few of them get developed or synthesized with each other: “The process of innocence collapsing into generation—or in other words, the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical, from innocence to experience—lays the groundwork for Blake’s articulation of creation anxiety” (60).

With a shift away from the stark contrasts that form its skeleton, Rovira’s book offers a fresh possibility of viewing each writer through the lens of the other in a number of tantalizing suggestions, such as through the relationship between generation and creation. Rovira’s observation that the creator figure in Blake’s *The Four Zoas* is Enion rather than Urizen, for instance, has intriguing implications for the earlier section on Thel and Oothoon (113). In this regard, the book contributes to a rethinking of the boundaries of theory, particularly as they need to be addressed vis-à-vis the field of European and British romanticism.