

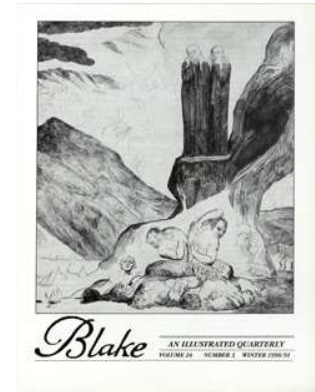
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R E V I E W

Historicizing Blake, A Conference

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Historicizing Blake: A Conference held at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, 5-7 September 1990

Reviewed by Jon Mee

The recent "Historicizing Blake" conference at Strawberry Hill offered ample evidence of the current vitality and diversity of historical criticism, while at the same time attesting to its difficulties of theoretical self-definition in relation to the still dominant formalist tradition in Blake studies. The organizers, Steve Clarke and David Worrall, had clearly worked hard to bring together a crowded and stimulating program. There were speakers from Britain, North America, and Australia, as well as an encouraging mixture of distinguished scholars and younger speakers. The atmosphere was one of enthusiastic exchange and often as much was on offer at the bar and between mouthfuls of food as at the sessions themselves.

A range of methodologies flourished, most of which were left implicit in their presentations by the speakers (perhaps as much a symptom of the 35-minute-per-paper format as any theoretical bashfulness). The majority of the papers presented contexts, some traditional, some much less so, against which to read Blake. Three well-established scholars stood out against this tendency and presented diachronic descriptions of Blake's output. Michael Phillips described the various copies of *Songs of Experience* and hinted that Blake gave progressively less consideration to the presentation of the text of the poems and increasingly foregrounded the visual aspects of the plates. It would have been interesting to have heard a fuller debate about the significance of these changes in relation to the different cultural contexts in which they

were produced. John Grant gave a detailed account of the development of the figure of the aged male patriarch from the early Joseph of Arimathea design to the various states of the "London" plate of *Songs*. The traditional dating (c.1821) of Blake's unfinished drawings based on the Book of Enoch was discussed in John Beer's paper. He put forward an alternative date, contemporary with Blake's composition of *Milton*, on the basis of similarities between the thematic treatment of sexuality in the drawings and the poem and evidence that excerpts from the apocryphal book were available in translation much earlier than is often accepted.

The first of the contexts to be broached was the art historical one of Blake's painting and engraving. Suzanne Matheson discussed Blake's place in the hegemonic discourse of Protestant art criticism. At the center of her discriminating paper was an exploration of the *Descriptive Catalogue* and the particular fusion of aesthetic and theological notions of judgment which it employs. Alexander Gourlay returned to the *Descriptive Catalogue* at the end of the conference in a paper that was as entertaining as it was convincing. Gourlay detailed the involvement of *The Canterbury Pilgrims* in the iconography of contemporary political prints to reveal a level of signification in the engraving lost to most formalist readings. Detlef Dörrbecker's concerns were more general and his paper offered a much needed appraisal of the social and cultural position of engraving as a profession (or craft?) in the art establishment of Blake's time. Though there is a growing body of work on the techniques of engraving contemporary with Blake, relatively little has been done on the social and cultural place of the engraver. Dörrbecker's paper was distinguished by impressive historical detail and theoretical acumen which revealed this neglect in a challenging way.

The majority of the other papers provided contexts either for the poetry or broader thematic issues across the whole of Blake's work. Phillip Cox teased out the complex relationship between *The Four Zoas* and eighteenth-century pastoral poetry in some interesting developments of issues which have exercised John Barrell's criticism. Taking Dyer's *The Fleece* as his primary example, Cox showed how the genre's naturalization of the expansion of trade and industrialization seems to be unraveled in the various configurations of Tharmas in Blake's poem. The related issue of eighteenth-century attitudes to imperial expansion was the context provided in Andrew Lincoln's discussion of the seventh and eighth Nights of *The Four Zoas*. Lincoln perceptively linked Blake's poetry to the histories of empire written by Ferguson, Gibbon, Hume, Miller, Rousseau, and Smith. All of these historians offered a perspective from which to critique imperial ambition and the decadence of luxury that Blake seems to have taken up and developed in more radical directions. If time had permitted, a comparison of Blake's position with other radical developments of the critique of empire, such as Volney's *Ruins*, would have been interesting. More generally both of these papers revealed the dynamism of Blake's engagement with the cultural mainstream of the eighteenth-century, a point also made in Mary Lynn Johnson's discussion of Blake's relationship to the various theories of the atom available in both scientific and cultural discourse.

The papers given by Marilyn Butler and Susan Matthews inspected the received notion that *Jerusalem* represents a shift into nationalism for Blake. Butler suggested that nationalism was not necessarily to be identified with Church and King conservatism. Drawing attention to the pervasive and progressive influence of the literature of the Celtic fringe on Blake's rhetoric, she concentrated on what *Jerusalem* gained from the radical cast of Welsh nation-

alism contemporary with its composition. Matthews's paper came to similar conclusions, though with an approach less concerned with contexts. Her discussion of a series of key passages in *Jerusalem* confirmed that the nationalism of Blake's great epic is far from being a univocal celebration of either the political or literary establishment.

Desirée Hirst turned to a much less familiar historical ground in a paper which drew attention to a neoplatonic tradition which she and Kathleen Raine have sought to maintain as the bounding line of Blake's meaning. It was the ambiguities of Blake's own notion of the bounding line which concerned Edward Larrissy. His dexterous paper explored the significance of alchemical symbolism for what is one of the most slippery key words in Blake's rhetoric. Both of these papers touched on the popular enthusiastic culture which was the focus of my paper as well as those of Peter Kitson and Iain McCalman.

My own concern was to discuss the significance for Blake of a particular case of the pervasive antinomianism of the popular religious culture of London. The subsidiary intent of the paper was to show that some of the texts of seventeenth-century radicals to which Blake is often linked were reprinted and implicated in the public religious and political controversies of Blake's time. Kitson looked at the parallel ground of Blake's millenarianism and suggested some of the difficulties of relating it to the missions of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott. The limited nature of studies which confine the context of millenarianism in the 1790s to Brothers and Southcott has been admirably demonstrated by Iain McCalman's recent book *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge UP, 1988). This refreshing and challenging study has opened a substantial period of British history to reveal a neglected but vivid nexus of "unrespectable radicalism."

Its particular concern with the aspiring literati amongst the artisan classes and their political affiliations is of obvious interest to Blake scholars. The paper delivered at the conference returned to this culture by following the career of W. H. Reid, a radical turncoat who was almost the exact contemporary of Blake. McCalman took us back into a period slightly before that covered by his book to trace the struggles of the aspiring writer, his relationship to the radical movements in place before the French Revolution, his response to the Revolution controversy, and the continuing but inconsistent nature of his radicalism thereafter. Apart from the many particular similarities adduced with Blake's situation and publications, the major significance of McCalman's paper for literary studies was its description of the eclectic refashioning of cultural materials undertaken by aspiring literati like Reid. The ambivalent engagement with polite culture typical of Reid and his peers offers a new way of thinking through the alterity of Blake's own visual and written bricolage. The uniqueness of Blake relative to his familiar canonical contemporaries need not be fixed as the reflex of romantic genius; it could be the sign of his proximity to the rich undergrowth of literary activity illuminated by McCalman. The more this undergrowth comes to light, the less adequate the romanticism we derive from Wordsworth, Coleridge et al. seems either as a context for teaching Blake or, more importantly, as a description of the culture of the period.

The many questions asked of McCalman after his paper suggested just how important to the attraction of Blake is the perception that his poetry and designs open up both a politics and a history that have been marginalized in the construction of our present intellectual reality. It was the question of what this radical opportunity means for the reader now which might be said to characterize my last grouping of papers. Bruce Woodcock examined

the politics of Paine and Blake in a paper that undermined some of the received assumptions about their differences while asking searching questions about their relevance to the modern reader. What a political reading of Blake's texts have offered our recent past was Phillip Gorski's concern. His paper charted the development on the British left, from the 1930s onwards, of a cultural affiliation that sought to identify in Blake an alternative to a rigid and mechanistic Marxism which still maintained the force of a radical critique of capitalism. The possibilities and limitations of that radicalism for a feminist critique were explored by Helen Bruder and Young-ok An. Bruder offered a subtle and convincing reading of *The Book of Thel* which moved with skill between an account of late eighteenth-century restrictions on female self-determination and the modern critical maintenance of those restrictions. A more theoretical feminist approach to Blake propelled An's Althusserian explorations of "History, Textuality, and Blake."

Perhaps it was this last grouping of papers that came closest to theorizing the objectives of a historical criticism. None, however, directly addressed the issue of what historicizing Blake might be, the most obvious omission from the conference as a whole. Historical criticism does not entail theoretical illiteracy, as any number of recent studies have demonstrated, nor was such illiteracy evident amongst the participants in the conference, judging by the intense discussions which went on around the papers. What the conference did demonstrate above all was the pressing desire to practice a historicizing criticism, a desire which for many of the speakers was informed by a sense that to evacuate the site of history, especially the fugitive history brought to light by McCalman, would be a political as well as critical evasion.