

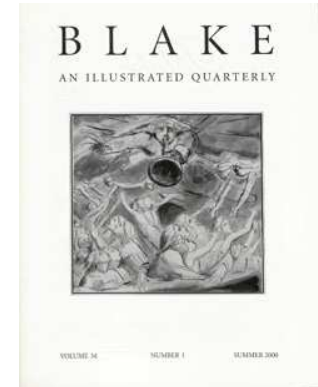
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Jackie DiSalvo, G. A. Rosso, and Christopher Z.
Hobson, eds., *Blake, Politics, and History*

Nicholas M. Williams

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satiated Hag" Catherine the Great, approaches the grotesque: "He may have intended an effect like Dante's vision of Philip the Fair embracing the Whore of Babylon, but he sometimes achieved something closer to the caricatures of Gillray and Isaac Cruikshank" (127). Paley grants to Coleridge's later marginalia and other prose jottings evidence of an interest in Revelation that he does not find in such later poems as "Limbo," to which he gave attention in a wise book of 1996.

Acknowledging that the apocalyptic and millennial lend power to Wordsworth's poems throughout his long career—and can be uncovered in nearly all his adumbrations of peaceful rural life—Paley concentrates on how the two states are related in *The Prelude*. He renders a sensitive account of the discharged soldier episode; at his very best relates the apocalyptic parable of the stone and the shell to Burnet, destruction by deluge, and the Last Man narratives; is informed on the irresolute and ultimately disillusioned treatments of the French Revolution in Books IX–XI; is admirably subtle on the Simplon Pass, and acute on the allegory of Mt. Snowden, where apocalypse and millennium "exist in a perpetual interchange with each other" (188). Wordsworth's internalizations of the apocalyptic in other poems are often too amorphous for Paley's focused examination, but will be fodder for some less scrupulous critic who takes up the subject.

Byron often refers metaphorically to a giant steed from Revelation, but seldom makes it a central topic (193). The exception to such quick glances is of course "Darkness," which evokes comparison with other Last Man narratives (197–209). Paley takes seriously Lucifer's meditations on Cuvier in Act II of *Cain*, and notes that Cain is more realistic than Shelley in reacting to apocalyptic knowledge; he dismisses *Heaven and Earth* from prolonged attention as "merely a disaster scenario" (209, 219). The chronology that assigns the last chapter to Keats creates an anti-climax. The two questions chiefly confronted are Keats's interest in political ideas and events and the relation of the two abandoned Hyperion poems, the first a vision of progress, the second apocalyptic. To the thematic question—why no millennium?—Paley answers that a sequel to apocalypse as Keats presents it cannot be imagined. One can imagine a dedicated Keatsian finding the millennial elsewhere in Keats's poetry unobstructed at least from interpretation, somewhat as one can imagine Victorianists becoming voluble if charged, as the Victorian poets are in the brief epilogue, with neglect of Revelation except in fictional wars of the worlds without the joy of millennium.

Before the anticlimax rises Shelley. Paley demonstrates the foreshadowing by Shelley's apprentice works of the major poems to come. *Queen Mab* is "a rarity," a "long millennial (not millenarian) poem" of slow growth toward perfection (225). A section on "Apocalitics" studies the "rewriting" of Revelation in *The Mask of Anarchy*, with close attention to the title, the structure, the graphic images, the reversals of meaning, and the poet's hesitant pointing toward a road from apocalypse to millennium. Within a series of perceptive com-

ments, Paley proposes Mortimer's *Death on a Pale Horse* as a better candidate than the possible *Death on the Pale Horse* of Benjamin West as pictorial source for Shelley's *Anarchy*, "pale even to the lips," on "a white horse, splashed with blood" (239). After the *Masque*, *The Revolt of Islam* serves largely to elucidate the heritage of images such as the serpent of revolution that links Blake, Coleridge, and *Prometheus Unbound*.

To *Prometheus Unbound* Paley devotes care just short of the reverential, for it "provides the most extensive treatment of the millennium to be written during the Romantic period" (253), "the most ambitious and least unsuccessful Romantic attempt to unite apocalypse and millennium" (275). He recognizes the simultaneity that allows the dawn of millennium before apocalypse has been fully realized (261), the amphisbaena's annulling alternative to the ouroboros, and the cyclic that obstructs any assurance of sustained utopia. Although he does not go as far as some of us would in attributing to Asia the predominant power in attaining millennium, he declares Asia unlike Blake's passive Jerusalem in initiating descent into the Cave of Demogorgon (261). He points more precisely than previous critics to the difficulties the "oratorio" of Act IV puts in the way of the more assured ending of Act III. A Shelleyan determined to explore beyond the reach of this book would give more space to *Hellas*.

Paley says nothing about the timeliness of his subject, but every student of Blake, Coleridge, *The Prelude*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and the Romantic period in England should avoid delay in studying this book, even if Clarendon's price makes it easier to own in fancy than in fact.

Jackie DiSalvo, G.A. Rosso, and Christopher Z. Hobson, editors. *Blake, Politics, and History*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998. xxxiii+387 pp. \$75.

Reviewed by NICHOLAS M. WILLIAMS

In her introduction to this new volume of essays, Jackie DiSalvo sets a high standard for its contributors and for emerging Blake studies more generally. Surveying the work on Blake of the last 60 years, she describes the well-known agon between the Erdman camp of historicists and the Frye camp of literary mythographers, a struggle in some ways recapitulated, although now along national lines, by the current split between American textualists (Nelson Hilton, Donald Ault, Molly Anne Rothenberg and Steven Goldsmith are mentioned) and British historical contextualizers (Ian McCalman, E. P. Thompson, Jon Mee, David Worrall). What she calls for, and it's a goal with which I'm broadly sym-

thetic, is a mode of criticism which manages to read history *into* the fabric of Blake's texts, rather than using it as an illuminating backdrop. The framework she identifies for this project, while admitting that not all the contributors to the volume would necessarily endorse it, is a Bakhtinian (more particularly, a Voloshinovian) focus on heteroglossia and the struggle for the control of signs by particular social groups. The test for a treatment of Blake, from this point of view, is whether it can use historical knowledge not merely to situate Blake's texts, to place them, but to activate them, and not merely for his time but, as DiSalvo is careful to point out, for ours as well.

Much the same point can be made by considering the relationship between the two abstract nouns in the title of the volume, nouns which, in the time-saving mentality of criticism on the run, are too often collapsed into each other. In a critical moment when the grand though empty gesture can sometimes rule the day, there's a familiar ring to the motto that "All History is Political" (the obverse is less frequently uttered). But the stakes of this juxtaposition become clearer when one considers the implications of bringing political frameworks to bear on a historical literary text. The Scylla and Charybdis of this critical venture are, on the one hand, assuming a too-easy political effectivity of a literary text, as if writing about revolution had the capacity to cause it (Andrew Lincoln's essay here is a particularly effective refutation of this position). On the other hand, though, one can certainly over-materialize politics as well, assuming that cultural expressions are mere ineffective epiphenomena of the truly determinative economic level. For a historical literary criticism, the result of such a conclusion is to reduce literature to a dead letter, politically inactive and left to the work of mere individualistic self-cultivation. The challenge DiSalvo has set for these essays, which the best of them meet, is to show the political effectivity of historical particularity or, to borrow an image from the brilliant twenty-first plate of *Milton*, to bind the sandal of the Vegetable World on Blake's left foot so that he might "walk forward thro' Eternity" (21:14, E 115). It is this double operation of historical binding and political movement that distinguishes the best of these essays, as I hope to make clear below.

The essays are divided into three untitled "parts" whose logic is not entirely clear (and not specified in the Introduction), but are further separated under six subheadings: "Blake and the Question of Revolution," "Blake and the Underground," "Art and Politics," "The French Revolution," "America," and "Europe," "Blake, Empire and Slavery" and "Blake and Women." Also included are responses by Joseph Wittreich and Anne Mellor, to the first two and the last two sections respectively. As one might expect, given the focus of the collection, those works of Blake which make the most explicit reference to historical events come in for the most detailed treatment, although I must also note very interesting discussions of *Jerusalem* by James E. Swearingen and June

Sturrock. A topic which runs like a leitmotif throughout the volume is the status of Blake's character Orc, and in particular the viability of Frye's influential critical construction of the "Orc cycle." One would expect this topic to be of concern in a politically themed collection, since it represents Frye's shot across the bow of Blake's political critics, identifying a disillusionment with revolution occurring fairly early in the poet's career. The invalidity of the Orc cycle is established most authoritatively in Christopher Z. Hobson's exhaustive treatment of Orc imagery in the opening essay, but the theme continues as an undercurrent through many of the essays. William Richey, for instance, suggests in his essay on *America* that, rather than reflecting Blake's misgivings about Orc's revolutionary energy, the poem refers obliquely to contemporaneous events in France in order to suggest that any violence in the new Republic is the fault of counter-revolutionary forces rather than the Jacobins. Although I can't quite accept this full vindication of *America's* Orc, these various treatments of the figure seem particularly useful in the way they raise crucial questions about the methods of interpreting Blake's imagery. Almost more important than Frye's assigning a non-revolutionary intention to Blake's imagery is the way he read imagistic parallels (in, for instance, the similar postures of Orc and Urizen in plates 8 and 10 of *America*) as necessarily implying semantic equivalence. These essays indicate that Blake's critics are coming up with more complex ways of reading his texts and images, in line with Swearingen's notion that each of Blake's characters "functions differently in different textual environments" (82). Even when a critic concludes that Blake really is suggesting an uncomfortable similarity between Orc and Urizen, as in Peter Otto's discussion of the many states of the frontispiece and title page of *Europe*, the way of handling the evidence is much more subtle than Frye's hasty assignments of single meaning. (Otto, it might be said, pushes his interpretations as far as they can go, until the reader is compelled to ask "Enough? or Too much?" as when he suggests that two faintly sketched women on the revised title page [see plate iic in Erdman's *Illuminated Blake*] represent "the opposing camps of Whore and Angel" [243]. But, in general, Otto gives the visual aspect of Blake's text the kind of detailed attention it has too rarely received.)

On a topic related to the Orc cycle, many of the essays also touch on what Steve Clark and David Worrall have called "the thesis of fracture," the notion that Blake undergoes a fundamental shift in focus which distinguishes his earlier explicitly political works from the fearsomely obscure late prophecies. In one of the least convincing essays in the volume, Eric V. Chandler restates the thesis of fracture as Blake's retreat from socially engaged literature to a dematerialized focus on imagination (and an elimination of all participants in the textual production process except Blake himself). Claiming that "Blake wants to establish the Bible as the heart of this new artistic production," Chandler identifies a "pro-

duction-aesthetic" (a term borrowed from Paul Mann) in Blake that "prioritiz[es] the mind," "giv[ing] over the possibility of producing any substantive changes in artists' real living conditions and thus play[ing] into the hands of the counterrevolution" (71). In addition to its tendency to efface Blake's far from orthodox approach to the Bible (as discussed in Stephen C. Behrendt's contribution to the volume), Chandler's position works with a naïve notion of the political effectivity of literature, seeming to take Blake to task for not achieving the revolution in print (one might just as well wonder how many despots are deposed by literary articles). But the parallel, though seemingly opposite, error is to assume the complete ineffectiveness of cultural production, as if thought played no role in historical change.

As if to answer these charges of political apostasy (although there's no indication that the authors have read each other's essays), Jon Mee and James Swearingen consider the effectivity of cultural production from two different directions, Mee continuing his superlative work of contextualizing Blake's visions while Swearingen offers the most theoretical account of Blake's visionary formulations in the volume. The central importance of Mee's work, for Blake studies and more generally, is in its dismantling of the still dominant opposition between religion and radicalism. Here, by way of a survey of the career of Richard "Citizen" Lee, Mee suggests the rich tradition of religious radicalism in the 1790s, frequently in tension with the more acknowledged radical tradition of Enlightenment thinkers such as those associated with Joseph Johnson. Rather than being a political rearguard in the radical movement, religious radicals often alienated their rational fellow-travelers specifically because their programs were *more* sweeping in their rejection of established authority. Mee does the necessary work of establishing the political valence of Blake's biblical imagery, as in his connecting the image of Nebuchadnezzar to satires of George III, and in his general identification of the political meaning of apocalyptic and prophetic discourses.

Swearingen's article works in a different vein, but it also serves to undermine Chandler's charges, since it suggests that the latter's notion of a "production-aesthetic" is far too general to account for Blake's detailed and varied accounts of artistic and social production. Swearingen offers a typology of production methods in Blake, taking in Urizen's construction of the Mundane Shell, Los's building of Golgonooza and the Eternals' figurative construction of a redeemed Jerusalem. Just as Mee stresses that religion can be radical, Swearingen shows that the visionary formulations of *Jerusalem* are themselves a political utterance. Readers will need to consult for themselves the details of Swearingen's account of *Jerusalem*, which culminates in a judgment that Blake here proposes "plurality as an end in itself" (90), but it suffices to say that he provides a very compelling political-theoretical framework for the startling innovations of Blake's last prophetic epic.

In addition to the contextual shading provided by Mee's

description of apocalyptic culture in the 1790s, one might also note two other accounts of historical settings for Blake that haven't yet been fully appreciated. David Worrall's treatment of Blake's unusual portrait of "Mrs. Q." (Harriet Quintin, a mistress of the Prince Regent at the time of his ascent to the throne) again puts the lie to the thesis of fracture by suggesting the radical satire contained within this seemingly placid engraving. Martha Keith Schuchard, treating an earlier episode in the young George's career (his attempt in 1788-89 to have his father declared incompetent by reason of insanity), reveals Blake's and George's connections to an extensive Masonic network resistant to the reign of George III. If these accounts are, in some ways, more circumstantial than Mee's wide-ranging treatment, they nevertheless suggest important historical contexts for Blake's career.

Further contexts are suggested in other essays, with varying degrees of success. G. A. Rosso's treatment of the often overlooked dramatic fragment "King Edward the Third" (from *Poetical Sketches*) usefully places that work in satiric dialogue with Shakespeare's *Henry V* and with the tradition of Empire poetry, especially Whitehead, Churchill, and Chatterton. June Sturrock offers an intriguing connection between Blake's portraits of maniacal women (the Female Will) and counter-revolutionary figurations of the spirit of revolution as a libidinous cruel female (Burke is her main example). If many of the essays here serve to clear Blake of the charge of disillusionment with revolution (the Orc cycle), then Sturrock attempts to clear him of much of the misogyny often attributed to his concept of Female Will. She convincingly describes his inversion of the conservative image of the cruel woman: where Burke sees revolution and wild sexuality as the source of woman's evil, Blake instead associates his cruel woman with chastity and counter-revolution. Although Sturrock doesn't come right out and say it, her suggestion is that Blake's target in the concept of Female Will is not women so much as the conservative mentality which deploys them in its iconography.

Less satisfying is John Hutton's connection of Blake's Satanic imagery with a growing body of depictions of Satan in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The pictorial context doesn't really shed new light on Blake's anarchic use of this imagery. Catherine L. McClenahan's account of Blake's experiments with the gendering of various concepts and entities, while useful as a survey of a large body of work, doesn't really leave enough time to comment on any single work to great effect. Anne Rubenstein and Camilla Townsend's detailed treatment of John Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* is more of a mixed bag. The treatment of Stedman's journal account of his time in South America and the revisions that account undergoes in being turned into a book (subject to the further editorial intrusions of Joseph Johnson) is quite interesting and well argued. Like the

volume's respondent, Anne Mellor, who is quite tough on this essay, I found the treatment of Blake's illustrations for the volume less convincing. But, at the same time, I can't agree with Mellor's assessment that the illustrations represent nothing more than Blake's complicity with Stedman. Particularly in her opinion of the well-known engraving of "Europe Supported by Africa and America" (not actually treated by Rubenstein and Townsend), whose "racism and sexism," according to Mellor, "are apparent" (352), it seems that more room needs to be left for a multivalent semiotics at work in this image.

I've left for final consideration two fine essays which significantly change our view of individual works and which will remain as required reading for their chosen texts of analysis. Harriet Kramer Linkin places the often overlooked Song of Innocence, "A Dream," within the context of what she calls the "maternity plot," the ideological idealization of motherhood which accompanies the rise of the middle class and its dominant mode of domesticity. Here again is an instance of a historical context read *into* a poetic text, for Linkin entirely changes the way we read the seemingly innocuous tale of the Emmet, the glow-worm and the beetle, and also the way we understand Blake's views on motherhood in *Songs of Innocence*. Her case needs to be read in its own careful detail, but I'll only hint that she offers a compelling account of what the Emmet might have been doing out on its own so late at night. Finally, Michael Ferber's account of the manifestly more difficult *Europe* must be added to the reading list of anyone who wants a better grip on this text. Ferber wisely directs his attention to the difficulties of the text itself, in its detailed negotiations with historical events and its literary past. Along the way, he offers new and compelling answers to questions such as, Why is Enitharmon dreaming? and Why does Newton blow the trump of the last doom? It will be difficult to comment on *Europe* in the future without reference to Ferber's authoritative treatment.

François Piquet. *Blake and the Sacred*. Paris: Didier Erudition, 1996. 450 pp. illus.

Reviewed by ANNE BIRIEN

François Piquet is a renowned scholar in France where he teaches English romanticism at Jean Moulin University, in Lyon. Among his publications that focus on Blake's poetics, *Blake et le Sacré* seems to be an elaboration of his doctoral dissertation of the same title (Clermont-Ferrand, 1981).

For Piquet, the belief that "everything that lives is holy" lies at the very source of Blake's poetic undertaking. This fundamental truth is frequently reasserted as a reminder of the responsibility that befalls the poet, who first needs to denounce the division of the creation that resulted in the

subordination of human beings to a dead religious language informed by abstract and arbitrary categories. He also has to revive the language of prophecy, invoke the original power of the word and thus rid modern existence of the tragic errors provoked and maintained by the sacred. Eventually, he is required to highlight man's ability to redeem himself, and escape from the sacred through exertion of responsible freedom.

Yet, the reader cannot but face a difficulty: how can Blake praise the holiness of existence and abhor the manifestations of the sacred in modern life? His whole work strives to demonstrate that these two positions are not contradictory but that the first one calls for the other. It is essential for the reader to become aware of the danger entailed by a confusion of the holy and the sacred—which the poet holds responsible for much of modern corruption. The problematic of the sacred chosen by Piquet in *Blake et le Sacré* thus proves to be a very useful key to the understanding and unraveling of Blake's works.

Piquet opts for a diachronic study that could render the conscious evolution of the poet's sensibility regarding the sacred; for if Blake was positive that the key to human fulfillment resided in the recovery of holiness, he was aware of the difficulty of the task and still had to devise the means to attain his goal. Piquet realizes a very insightful study of the poet's major influences and of their incorporation into the canon; the failures of the Gnostics or Milton, for instance, are important to Blake in that they allow him to reflect on the pervasive presence and resilience of the sacred. However, I sometimes regretted that Piquet devotes too much space to the presentation of philosophical or theological theories instead of focusing on a closer analysis of Blake's poems—especially since he is just as thorough and acute when he abandons his theoretical style for a more poetic one, fraught with telling imagery.

The sacred is the common link between the fragmentation of individual psyche and a more collective awareness of historical fluctuations and ideological upheavals. Blake's crusade would, however, remain incomplete were it not accompanied by the creation of a new poetic form or medium able to combine energy and reason. His myth making does not so much aim at destroying religion altogether or at proposing another religion which would merely crown different figures of authority—since Christ is pictured as the ultimate savior of humanity. Rather, the artist casts a different light on Christianity, as René Girard did almost two centuries later when he composed a ground-breaking interpretation of the New Testament as anti-sacrificial;¹ for the Christian scholar the death of Christ interrupts the cycle of violence and abolishes the sacred installed by traditional religion. Piquet's biggest contribution lies in the parallel he

¹ In *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris, Grasset, 1972 and *Des Choses Cachées depuis le Commencement du Monde*, Paris Grasset, 1978.