

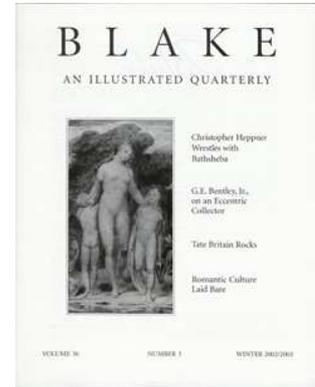
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Iain McCalman, general ed.; Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, assoc. eds., *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*

Nelson Hilton

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black-and-white image of an old woman, her eyes closed, her head moving back and forth as she grimaces and contorts her features, as if in mental anguish. We hear what sounds like someone hissing or breathing awkwardly, but the sound isn't synchronized to the picture. After a bit, the image and sound freeze, and Sinclair begins to recite this very strange poem from the Pickering Manuscript—until he reads the first word of the sixth verse, "Till." At which point, the image and sound start up again for a while, then freeze again, and the recitation or commentary picks up again until the next "till." This becomes a bit tedious and predictable, and some of the shifts back and forth don't go smoothly, but hearing the poem is worth the glitches. At the end of "Mental Traveller," Catling reads one of his own poems—meaning, I suppose, to illustrate how Blake had influenced him, but I couldn't discern any parallelism.

After hearing Jah Wobble's 1996 album, *The Inspiration of William Blake*, months before the concert, I looked forward to this set the most. The album is an eclectic mix of Blake lyrics ("Songs of Innocence," "Tyger," "Holy Thursday," etc.), atmospheric soundscapes, backing tracks, Eastern esoterica, and Western beats—in the manner of what is often now referred to as "world music."

The music and name suggest Caribbean origins, but Jah Wobble is actually an East End cockney named John Wardle, who emerged from the British punk rock scene of the late 70s and early 80s. In a drunken stupor, Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols twisted his name into Jah Wobble, which he adopted because he thought it made him sound like a Jamaican bass player. When the Pistols dissolved, Johnny Rotten invited Wobble to play bass in his new band, Public Image Ltd., and when that too crashed, he dropped out of the music scene to become a train driver on London's underground until the late 80s. When he came back, he dropped the virulent nihilism of punk rock—in part because he discovered Blake—for experimental, eclectic collaborations with Björk, Brian Eno, Sinéad O'Connor, and many others.

Despite this inner change, Wobble is an imposing physical presence—a big hulk of a fellow with a shaved head. Joining him on the Purcell Room stage is Deep Space, a three-piece band he often plays and records with. The name is apt: with Wobble laying down the steady bass line, the others join in a hypnotic thirty-minute improvised instrumental piece that builds, Bolero-like, to a loud crescendo. Clive Bell and Jean-Pierre Rasle supply most of the sound—an improbable, exotic mix of French bagpipes, crumhorn, recorders, Turkish sipsi, shinobue flute, and stereo goathorns. On the screen above them, a slide show alternates between drawings and paintings by Blake and John Freeman (who did the concert program cover above). Certainly Blakean in the spacey sense.

After the intermission, visionary comic book novelist Alan Moore smolders onto the stage. He's tall, with long dark hair and beard, dressed in black, and accompanied by composer Tim Perkins. Given Blake's comic book style (the mix

of pictures and words) and his vivid colors, it's understandable that Moore sees Blake as an influential precursor. Moore's 1986 *Watchman* redefined the comic book medium, and his graphic novel, *From Hell*, was made into a film, again starring Depp.

After Moore settles into a seat at center stage, a recorded sound track commences, to which Perkins adds percussive touches. On the screen above Moore's head, a psychedelic video plays. And then Moore begins to read "Angel Passage," his own densely evocative, epic description of Blake's life in blank verse (a recording is available on the RE: label, PCD04, at www.stevenseverin.com). After a bit, performer Andrea Svajcsic, dressed in a white robe and carrying lighted torches, appears on stage behind Moore, swigs drafts of flammable liquid, and breathes fire into the air. At the end, she returns in a cloud of white smoke, cloaked in huge angel wings. Although it is overly busy, this performance seems the centerpiece of the evening and the closest to a genuine tribute. "It's not enough to study or revere him—only be him," insists Moore, who actually believes himself to be the reincarnation of Blake.

Last, and I'm afraid least, comes film composer Simon Boswell (*Photographing Fairies, A Midsummer Night's Dream*), along with a small chamber orchestra and classical pianist Chris Ross, Blur's Dave Rowntree on drums, former Sex Pistol Glen Matlock on bass, and surprise guest, actor Ewan McGregor. The musicians perform the first public airing of a new work called *Time to Die*, which combines the classical score of *Photographing Fairies* with a contemporary rap railing against the false glamour of early death, read by McGregor. What this has to do with Blake, I can't guess.

For the grand finale, performers and audience join in a standing singalong of Blake's "Jerusalem." All in all, some of the evening's performances worked, some didn't—much like Blake's art. The tygers of wrath were as wise as the horses of instruction.

An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832. Iain McCalman, general ed.; Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, assoc. eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 780 pp., 109 illus. £85/\$150 cloth; £20/\$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

Unlike the *Encyclopedia of Romanticism: Culture in Britain, 1780s-1830s*, reported on in these pages nine years ago, this larger and more comprehensive volume offers itself as a "companion": *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*. Discussing this denomination in the "Introduction," the general editor Iain

McCalman refers to the advent of the "encyclopaedia" in the eighteenth century, but notes Coleridge's deprecatory rant that "[t]o call a huge unconnected miscellany of the *omne scibile*, in an arrangement determined by the accident of initial letters, an encyclopaedia, is an impudent ignorance of your Presbyterian bookmakers" (5). The "*Companion*," he continues, formed "another genre [which] made a quiet entry onto the publishing scene during the Romantic period," though "[n]obody, including its authors, seems to have been sure" as to what constituted one (10). Leigh Hunt's hopes for his 1828 periodical, *The Companion*, are invoked to characterize the editor's aims for the present endeavor: it would "not express a unified view of the world, but generate a collision and comparison of opinion from which truth would emerge . . . in a form that was always entertaining and personable, so as to generate a real friendship" (11).

The volume divides almost exactly into two parts, first a collection of forty-one essays grouped under the four conceptual headings "Transforming Polity and Nation," "Re-ordering Social and Private Worlds," "Culture, Consumption, and the Arts," and "Emerging Knowledges," and then alphabetical entries for "subjects viewed by the editors as intrinsically and self-evidently important to the cultural history of the period" (ix). This latter section is wonderfully ample, and includes useful entries on a variety of subjects not included in the 1992 *Encyclopedia* (e.g., *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, the London Corresponding Society, C. F. Volney, Edward Williams, Rousseau, John Thelwall). There are also 109 black-and-white illustrations "to reflect the fascination" of the Romantic epoch "with visual culture—with new styles and subject-matter in painting, with print-making and caricature, fashion and design" (x). All these elements are linked with a network of cross-references, the most playful occurring in the alphabetical entry for "romanticism," where the asterisk in the reference to "the period . . . encompassed in this *Romantic Age Companion*" refers the reader to the whole of the book.

The longer essays, which range around 6,000 words each, constitute the innovation and glory of the book, and are to be recommended as a fascinating overview and guide to key topics in current thinking about the romantic age or—the label which also tempted the editors—"the age of Revolution." All make for very rewarding reading, but among those which particularly struck this reviewer were the discussions of "Slavery," "Land," "Popular Culture," "Painting," "Poetry," "Antiquarianism (Popular)," "Language" and "Literary Theory."

In his essay on "Slavery" (sixth in the book), James Walvin emphasizes how products "of the slave empire and global commerce"—like tobacco, tea, coffee, chocolate, and in particular sugar—"so deeply embedded [themselves] in British daily experience that [their] social and economic origins passed unnoticed" (61). He reminds us that "Of all the slaves landed in the Americas, some 70 per cent worked in sugar," the crop which made the new bitter potions palatable

(59). If one compares his numbers for tons of sugar imported with population data elsewhere in the volume, it seems that the average consumption of sugar per person per year increased 400% to 500% between 1700 and 1800 (on its way to an average consumption of 100 pounds per person per year in 1900). This dramatic change, written into the very bodies of the British public and the rituals of daily life, emphasizes the extent to which "apparently innocent aspects of domestic consumption" were enabled by "the exercise of imperial power and commercial dominion" (61) that saw the delivery to the Americas by British slavers of 35,000 to 40,000 Africans annually. Walvin also offers a concise discussion of the "brilliant propaganda campaign" of the abolition movement and how it meshed with the growing ethos of sensibility (subject of an exemplary essay, the book's eleventh, by Barker-Benfield). One cannot but wonder, in light of the larger complex social dynamic which the volume so powerfully conveys, to what extent abolition served also as a kind of lure or false-consciousness to deflect and diffuse concern for the growing wage-slavery in Britain itself.

Anne Janowitz's essay on "Land" (the book's sixteenth) foregrounds "the practice and rhetoric of 'improvement'" (153). The term turns out to have implications far beyond husbandry:

Improvement as a practice referred to the management and cultivation of land to render it more profitable; as a discursive and rhetorical term improvement came to refer to moral or social cultivation. In the context of European and trans-Atlantic warfare as well as trade, improvement had a global dimension. In the context of the culture of Romanticism, the meanings of improvement range from an external set of incentives for increasing profit to a set of internal pressures for developing the Self. In the long run, the moral associations of the discourse of improvement outstripped its originally economic meaning, but in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the meanings of improvement were often contradictory and obscure, as questions of profit and decorum were at times experienced as congruent, and at others as irreconcilable. (153)

An entry on "children's literature" in the book's second part quotes a reviewer of *A Mirror for the Female Sex: designed principally for the Use of Ladies' Schools* (1798) who argues that "The age we live in discovers a laudable anxiety for the improvement of the rising generation" (451). This history bears remembering in the context of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which tells us, in perhaps deliberately unimproved fashion, that "Improvement [sic] makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement, are roads of Genius" and foresees "an improvement of sensual enjoyment." More conventional is Blake's rhetorical question, "What is the Joy of Heaven but Improvement in the things of the Spirit?" (*Jerusalem* 77). When Janowitz makes the interesting observation that "the period we have come to designate as 'Ro-

manticism' coincides exactly with the years of the greatest number of parliamentary enclosure acts" (160), one wonders whether children of a future age will look back at the present and find any contemporary upheaval to correlate with the appropriative intellectual enclosures presently enacted as extensions of copyright.

Iain McCalman and Maureen Perkins begin the twenty-third essay, on "Popular Culture," by noting "two overarching theses about popular culture in the Romantic age" argued by historians since the 1960s:

first, they have contended that a long-term process of polarization between elite and plebeian cultures widened into a yawning gulf; second, that over this same period the British middle and ruling classes subjected the culture of the common people to intensifying attack in order to eradicate or reform traditional customs and morality. Popular culture, they have argued, thus became increasingly oppositional and embattled, the domain of the labouring poor and outcast. This process of marginalization was compounded by the modernizing forces of commercialism and consumerism [the subject of the nineteenth essay]. (214)

They dwell in particular over the imposition of and "desire for a new uniform temporality"—evident in factory schedules and "the standardization of timetables"—and the resulting internalization of a new time-consciousness as a profound development of the age. But citing a new awareness of "some exaggeration both of the degree of cultural dominance achieved by the ruling classes . . . and of the extent to which plebeian culture took exclusively oppositional forms" (216), the body of the essay examines "the experiences and cultural expressions of three of the period's most notable plebeians: the brilliant Northamptonshire peasant poet John Clare, the celebrated Devonshire servant-prophetess Joanna Southcott, and London's bestselling writer-journalist Pierce Egan" (216-17). Each of these—and evidently also Blake, labeled in passing as Clare's "urban counterpart"—"mark[s] a confluence-point where orality and print, canonical literary works and street genres, combined and exchanged in complex ways" (217).

Mark Hallett's discussion of "Painting" (twenty-seventh in the book) insightfully summarizes the "class system for painting" which organized picture types according to "a progressively diminishing aesthetic status: portraiture, landscape, genre, and still-life painting" (252). At the top of this hierarchy in the late eighteenth century was the Royal Academy with its "patrician and elitist pretensions" embodied in the *Discourses* of Joshua Reynolds (whose "career is closely tied to the gradual professionalization and institutionalization of the arts in this period," according to his alphabetical entry [676], and thus, for Blake, one who "was Hired to Depress Art").

Reynolds declares, 'the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in

the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it: it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist.' Through such high-flown language, the artist is thoroughly disassociated from the mechanical skills of craftsmanship, redefined as a liberal intellectual working within an enlightened Academic community, and mythologized as someone constantly seeking to 'raise the thoughts, and extend the view of the spectator.' (252)

But as Hallett also points out, there were also "irreverent . . . pamphlets like *The Royal Academicians: A Farce, of 1786* by Anthony Pasquin [John Williams, who rates a separate entry], or *Lyric Odes to the Royal Academicians* (1782-85) by Peter Pindar [John Wolcot, who 'remains seriously underestimated' according to his longer note]" which "offered a satirical and sophisticated rebuttal to the Academy's lofty claims to grandeur" (253). Such works would doubtlessly have interested a contributor to the 1785 Academy exhibition and confirm for me a satiric context of the immediate art world for Blake's manuscript *Tiriel*, which like his *Descriptive Catalogue* of twenty years later also (in Hallett's words) "bemoaned the state of the arts in a corrupt society" (256).

After a nod to a collective "lost 'seventh' Pleiad" of poets who might be considered with the usual six, Jerome McGann pitches his essay on "Poetry" (twenty-ninth in the book) around "the two dominant poets of their age, Byron and Wordsworth [, who] fairly define the contradictions of Romantic writing in the agon of their poetic relationship." Appropriately for "an age of taxonomic enthusiasm" (illustrated with charts published in 1787 and in 1798 which tabulated poetic achievements) McGann offers this most pithy paragraph:

If Byron and Blake stand together, and against Wordsworth, in their ethical judgment of nature and the non-human order of things, Wordsworth and Blake clearly share, over and against Byron, a belief that a redemptive scheme shapes both individual and collective existence. Byron and Wordsworth, on the other hand, stand against Blake in the authority they assign to objective and material conditions. For Wordsworth and Byron, everything is *not* as it is perceived; indeed, the primacy of a 'real' independent of perception or imagination characterizes their descriptive writing. Blake, in contrast, stands much closer to Keats, whose descriptions are driven by desire and structure as an order of pure language. (276)

Marilyn Butler's wonderful essay on "Antiquarianism (Popular)," the thirty-fifth, proposes to establish the contribution of the antiquarians "to cultural history and the professional modern study of both language and literature" by considering "four exemplary figures, all active in diverse aspects of popular culture by the last quarter of the eighteenth century—John Brand, Francis Grose, Joseph Ritson, and Francis Douce, and one in the early nineteenth century, William Hone" (329). Grose, for whom Burns wrote

"Tam O'Shanter," memorably described himself "in his collected essays, *The Grumbler* (1791), as 'an Opposition-man and Grumble-man'" (330). Thanks to Butler, the reader learns that

in *A Guide to Health, Beauty, Riches and Honour* (1785) [Grose] assembles an entertaining collection of these notices from London newspapers and journals, to disclose to "those living remote from the capital . . . the vast improvement made within this century, not only in the more abstruse sciences, but in the arts and conveniences of life." Grose's selection includes Mr Martin Vanbutchell, dentist, of Upper Mount Street, Grosvenor Square, who exhibits his embalmed wife to anyone armed with an introduction, any day between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. except Sunday. In the *Guide* Grose anticipates Southey and Dickens in his curiosity about human wants and his eye for the grotesque. (330)

Butler concludes that in their work with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century literature, the antiquarians "were constructing a cultural history and a history of mentalities." In particular, "[b]y diagnosing late medieval culture as anarchic, disorderly, semi-pagan, and Rabelaisian, they were reading similar characteristics even into individual works," which action, she argues, "should have massive implications for our understanding of Romantic form" (334).

The two last long essays, the fortieth and forty-first, present Blake scholars Jon Mee on "Language" and Peter Otto on "Literary Theory." Mee reminds us that the "spectre of an increasingly literate population, whether real or imagined, desirable or undesirable, helps explain the urgency of debates from the middle of the eighteenth century about what constituted 'correct' English"—an urgency which seems to have motivated over 200 writings on "grammar, rhetoric, criticism, and linguistic theory" published between 1750 and 1800, as against fewer than one per year over the preceding fifty years. This context highlights the importance of John Horne Tooke, whose "experience in the law courts convinced him that language was an important instrument through which the authority of the elite was maintained" (374). His [*Epea pteroenta*], *Or Diversions of Purley* "sets itself up as an attack on . . . 'Metaphysical [that is, verbal] Imposture': the process by which the language operated in the interests of the powerful to exclude the unlearned from the public sphere" (374, 376). Blake seems to have this dynamic in mind with the emphasis in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* on "what [something] is called" and the confrontation between the narrator and the angel where what is seen depends on "metaphysics" and the "imposing" of one phantasy on another. Mee also introduces Charles Pigott's "much-reprinted *Political Dictionary* (1795)" as another agent, with Paine's *Rights of Man*, in the struggle against "imposture"; Blake must have enjoyed Pigott's assertion of "an entirely different and equally valid language of politics in which, for instance, 'Church' could

be glossed as 'a patent for hypocrisy; the refuge of sloth, ignorance and superstition, the corner-stone of tyranny'" (376).

Otto finds a "juxtaposition of aesthetics with questions of subjectivity and politics" to be characteristic of the age and effectively highlights how "[t]he literary and aesthetic theories of Coleridge and De Quincey elaborate different but interrelated responses to the late-eighteenth-century 'turn' to the subject exemplified by Kant" (378, 384). Subject himself (one is surprised to learn) of "[a]t least four book-length studies . . . published in London between 1795 and 1798," Kant's "circumscription of human knowledge" deflates "the pretensions of the literatures of knowledge and of power," and makes him for De Quincey "a disenchanter the most profound" (379, 382, 381). An illuminating two paragraphs on Coleridge's discussion of "the Brocken Spectre" suggest in a most accessible fashion "[t]he convergence between Kant's epistemological dilemmas and Coleridge's Romantic aesthetics" (382). Blake hardly figures in this overview, though Otto risks the shorthand formulation that "Blake attempts to open Kant's categories (the fixed forms of Urizen) and the forms of time and space (Los and Enitharmon) to the ungrounded energies of Eternity" (q.v. Otto's 1991 book) and observes that Blake aligns "subjectivity, aesthetics, and politics in a way that, one imagines, would be dismissed by Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey, or Peacock" (384).

The topics of essays in the book's first part not yet mentioned include: "Revolution" (Mark Philp), "War" (J. E. Cookson), "Democracy" (H. T. Dickinson), "Women" (Barbara Caine, who notes very close links between "the question of genius and the question of women's sexual subjectivity" [50]), "Empire" (John Gascoigne), "Policing" (David Philips), "Law" (David Lemmings), "Utopianism" (Gregory Claeys), "Religion" (R. K. Webb), "Poverty" (Sarah Lloyd), "Domesticity" (Clara Tuite, who comments that the "naturalization of middle-class ideological prerogatives is what constitutes the ideal of domesticity" [129]), "Industrialization" (John Stevenson), "Class" (Eileen Janes Yeo), "Education" (Ian Britain), "Medicine" (Roy Porter, who contends curiously that "William Blake revelled in the idea that he was himself mad" [175]), "Consumerism" (Roy Porter, again—an essay illustrated with a page of Josiah Wedgwood's creamware shapes engraved by Blake in 1817), "Viewing" (C. Suzanne Matheson), "Publishing" (John Brewer and Iain McCalman, an essay augmented by a three-column entry on "publishing companies" in part two), "Prints" (David Bindman), "Theatre" (Gillian Russell), "Design" (Celina Fox), "Music" (Cyril Ehrlich and Simon McVeigh), "Architecture" (Daniel Abramson), "Prose" (Jon Klancher), "Novels" (Fiona Robertson, who singles out *Ivanhoe* as "probably the single most dominant cultural product of the nineteenth century" [295]), "Enlightenment" (Martin Fitzpatrick, who focuses on "Rational Dissent"), "Political Economy" (Donald Winch, who notes how both Burke and Paine "laid claim to the basic insights of Smith's political economy of mo-

dermy" [313]), "Natural Philosophy" (Richard Yeo), "Mythology" (Nigel Leask), "Exploration" (Nicholas Thomas), "History" (James Chandler), and "Psychology" (Robert Brown).

The second half of the *Companion* offers a cornucopia of shorter entries covering biographies, "cultural and political movements, important incidents and events, influential ideas and discourses, and technical terms or definitions" (ix). Here, just to sample briefly, we learn of "clubs oriented towards women such as the Belle Assemblée and the Female Parliament at the University of Rational Amusement" (480); that the years between 1801 and 1812 saw the transformation of "British experimental science from the artisanal mode of Priestley into the institutionally centered 'big chemistry' of the new metropolitan science" (479); that the father of Robert Malthus was Rousseau's executor (594); that Gideon Algernon Mantell, the discoverer of dinosaur fossils, "had in his last years alienated many colleagues and friends, and his funeral drew not one scientific or public figure" (595); that Harriet Martineau "spent her last twenty years in expectation of imminent death" (597);¹ that the first notable use of the term "melodrama" ["music drama"] oc-

1. Gary Kamiya's review of Jan Bondeson's *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear* (2001), adds the curious datum that in her will, "[t]aking no chances, the writer Harriet Martineau left her doctor 10 guineas to cut off her head" (<http://dir.salon.com/books/feature/2001/03/07/buriedalive/index.html?pn=1>).

curs in 1802 (599); that the embodiment of Enlightenment publishing, Joseph Johnson, published "over thirty books on prophecy" (604); that John William Polidori's younger sister was the mother of Christina Rossetti (652); that Morgan John Rhys, who described himself in 1789 as "a Welshman opposed to all oppression" founded in 1798 an Allegheny mountain settlement "appropriately christened Beulah" (677); that in considering the history of Romanticism, "particularly since the early twentieth century, we can see the startling rise of Blake," who "independent of Immanuel Kant . . . proclaimed that mental things alone are real" (683); that Mary Shelley now receives more column inches than her husband; that Sir Robert Smirke was "probably the most successful and least inspired architect of the early nineteenth century" (708); and that Sarah Trimmer, as editor of the *Guardian of Education*, warned in its 1802 opening number of "[a] conspiracy against CHRISTIANITY and all SOCIAL ORDER . . . endeavouring to infect the minds of the rising generation, through the medium of books of Education and Children's Books" (739).

In sum, the book is a splendid achievement, one which should be in the hands of everyone with a more than passing interest in Romanticism. While the hardcover price is rather daunting, Oxford has now published the volume at the most attractive price of \$29.95, which makes it easy to recommend as the boon companion for any undergraduate or graduate student of Romanticism.

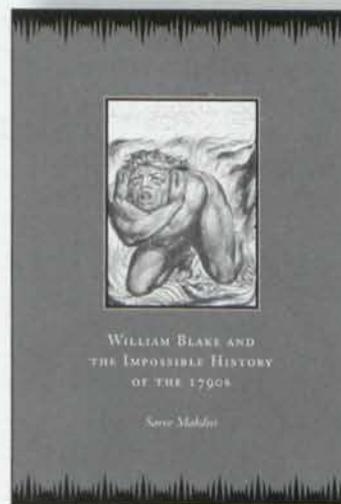
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