

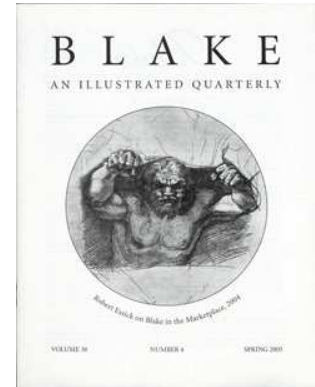
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R E V I E W

Morris Eaves, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*

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Morris Eaves, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xix + 302 pp.; 36 b&w illus. \$65.00/£45.00, hardcover; \$23.99/£15.99, paperback.

Reviewed by Karl Kroeber

Best about this collection is its targeting of readers starting serious study of Blake. The aim has encouraged most contributors to focus on fundamental problems as difficult problems. The results are of value equally to beginners and antiques like me who've been delightedly struggling with Blake's mind-expanding art for half a century. A few essayists lose track of the volume's orientation. Saree Makdisi unfortunately doesn't follow his own good insight that Blake's work should inspire us to unlearn "whatever it is that makes us 'learned'" (111). In "The Political Aesthetic of Blake's Images," Makdisi wanders into a dark wood of conventionalities about the relation of poetry to graphic images, committing the commonest sin of recent criticism, citation of secondary sources without assessment of *their* sources or reliability (e.g., 132n9). Susan Wolfson, in "Blake's Language in Poetic Form," slides into analyses of *Poetic Sketches* which may baffle beginners, particularly because this seems a retreat from justifying her claim that the poetics of the later *French Revolution* opened "a revolutionary path from which Blake would never really retreat" (64). Analyzing technicalities of poetics is never easy, but Wolfson's blasts of details (in which Blake's peculiar efficacy with trochaic and anapaestic meters gets missed) are off-putting.

Eaves provides an introductory essay that is admirable in its refusal to oversimplify, while defining lucidly what makes Blake's difficulties exciting to study. Illustrative is Eaves' observation that Blake's rise beyond aesthetic respectability to celebrity was facilitated by publication of his verse stripped of its graphic contexts, contexts which now are the principal focus of serious study of his work. Developing such historical ironies and never evading the continuous emergence of contradictions of every kind in both Blake's work and its critiques, Eaves convincingly presents the artist's oeuvre as simultaneously resistant and accessible, finally suggesting in the tradition of Frye that what Blake offers is "Not freakish nor unique ... but the epitome of reading itself" (13). This leads to a sound recommendation to cultivate "the attitudes suggested by Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' and Keats's 'negative capability'—strong openness to new artistic experiences, unbiased by prior commitments" (15).

Aileen Ward follows with attractive comments on "William Blake and His Circle" which better than most full-scale biographies evoke a sense for Blake as a social being. She introduces one of the most praiseworthy features of this collection, that it does not slight the later years of Blake's life, doing justice to the satisfactions of the final decade under the sponsorship of Linnell and the esteem of younger artists. One should read Ward's essay along with Jon Mee's "Blake's Politics in History" later in the volume; Mee intelligently and helpfully describes the political side of Blake's social life which is of secondary interest to Ward. The essays together evoke a strong sense of Blake's sociable inclinations.

Joe Viscomi ingeniously begins his essay on the "Illuminated Printing" at the end of Blake's life with his work on the *Job* engravings, then sweeps backward to condense into 25 pages an astonishingly accessible summary of the detailed and complex scholarship by which he has changed our thinking of how and why Blake divided sheets of copper, engraved, etched, wrote, printed, and colored as he did—hand labor creating imaginative works that stagger the imagination. This essay alone makes the *Companion* worth the purchase price, because it provides a beginner with a clear understanding of Blake's working methods on which today all responsible scholars must found their critical interpretations. It also provides the basic information needed to begin to make effective use of the William Blake Archive on the internet. This extraordinary resource, for which Viscomi, Robert Essick, and Eaves are primarily responsible, is not adequately highlighted by the *Companion* (media competition?). The Archive makes possible rapid, efficient, and inexpensive research into Blake by inquirers of whatever level of training and expertise. It is a godsend for the specialist, particularly one who is comparing illuminated texts, and it can be explosively exciting for undergraduates, not merely in empowering their engagement with Blake but also in enabling them to experience firsthand the pleasures of detailed humanistic research.

David Bindman handles with tact and good sense the essentially frustrating subject of "Blake as a Painter," in part because he understands (as most literary critics do not) that Blake's refusal to paint in oils made him in his own day and ours a pariah in the art (and art history) establishment—along with the host of English watercolorists of his era who created one of the great "schools" of Western art, still ignored by art historians who prefer to enthuse murkily over fourth-rate oil painters. This makes Bindman's praise of the unfinished watercolor series on Dante especially cogent:

The demands of illustrating Dante are enormous, given the intricacy and profusion of his imagery, and the importance of physical atmosphere, but Blake does more than fulfill those demands. For each completed image in the series, and this applies just as forcefully to the biblical watercolors and those to Milton, is itself a history painting that would be persuasive on any scale, despite the "low" medium of watercolor. (108)

Most welcome is Robert Ryan's sensible and historically sound contribution on "Blake and Religion." Most welcome, because religion is too seldom mentioned by others in this volume, although it was the central subject of every one of Blake's prophecies. (I was surprised by another interest of Blake's that goes virtually unmentioned here, sex—but maybe I'm just a dirty old man.) Ryan's focus on Blake's de-mythologizing and his consistent attacks on the "pretence of Religion to destroy Religion" is salutary. Any judgment of Blake's politics is inadequate unless it takes account of their religious component. Ryan rightly identifies the crux of these as the relations between Jesus and imagination—I say rightly not because of my infinite wisdom but because that has been the focal point in Blake's work for serious twentieth-century theologians.

The final section on specific works generally sustains the high level of the opening portions of the *Companion*. Nelson Hilton deals intelligently, perceptively and judiciously with all the early works, moving quickly but easily, never forcing even his best interpretations—so I think a beginner would find them all helpful for getting into the poems in his or her own fashion. Too little contemporary criticism is useful in this generous way. Hilton keeps the chronologies straight without fussiness, and supplies minimal context with fine tact—bringing it to bear only when it is needed. Andrew Lincoln is less successful at the daunting task of dealing with the prophecies "From *America to The Four Zoas*." Although he makes some useful observations, for example, that few "works in English can express a more powerful sense of the body's capacity for pain" than *Uri-zen* (217), Lincoln's understanding sometimes skids along the surface to become misleading. Blake's associating of "liberty with increased 'sensual enjoyment'" is fundamental, not, as Lincoln implies, a mere borrowing from Swedenborg (212). On 219 he seems to suggest that Blake "associates sexuality—and especially female sexuality—with evil." I think (and hope) Lincoln means that this is the false myth that Blake attacks, but I doubt that a newcomer to the prophecies could deduce that meaning from his prose. Whether it was Lincoln's own choice or an editorial decision, trying to pack criticism of so

many difficult works into a scant twenty pages was unwise. I observe in passing that, although the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (a favorite of mine) supplies the picture for the front cover of the *Companion*, it receives minimal attention, outside of a paragraph from Ryan and another from Hilton.

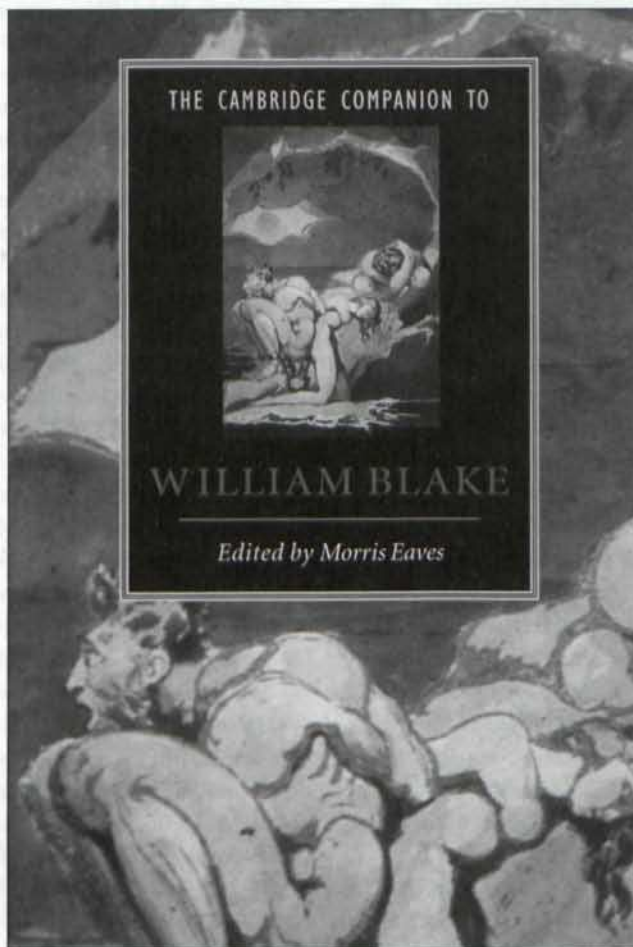
Robert Essick's "Jerusalem and Blake's Final Works" provides an excellent introduction to that last vast prophecy by neither reducing it to an interpretation nor fitting it into a convenient ideological scheme but accepting that in the poem "Blake questions the very grounds of understanding—not just

of his work, but of the world" (252). This appropriately links *Jerusalem* back to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which tells us dogmatically to disbelieve any dogmatic statement. Having asserted that in *Jerusalem* "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place," Blake went merrily ahead to rearrange the sequence of plates in the final two copies of the poem he collated. Elucidating the poem's dynamic form through attention to recurrent minute particulars, Essick traces one of its crucial metonymic "image clusters" of fibers and threads, which leads to his insight that this "image field" has a disconcerting "tendency to convert its terms into the vehicles of metaphors." So much for Roman Jakobson. Essick is persuasive in demonstrating that the prophecy's contradictions interestingly fulfill the "tendency of fixed structures ... to become mobile evol[ing] into

a visionary physics based on space-bending, dimension-multiplying processes" (262).

Even more valuable is his recognition that if *Jerusalem* "is Blake's greatest achievement in the illuminated epic" (265), it did not conclude his career as an artist. Essick describes cogently Blake's later work, including the visionary heads, the marvelous miniature wood engravings for Philips' *Imitation of Eclogue I*, the illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* and *Job*, concluding with the *Laocoön* engraving. As with other essays in this volume, the reader is provided with a sense for the full reach and span of Blake's career—a rarity in recent criticism.

Mary Lynn Johnson's "Milton and Its Contexts" is the best brief essay I've encountered on what I regard as Blake's most difficult prophecy. Much of her success comes from flinging



herself into the fearful symmetries of the text with the enthusiasm of a beginner, even though she brings to her task broad knowledge and long experience of grappling with mind-boggling minute particulars of Blake's artistry. While accompanying new readers into the poem to enjoy "find[ing] themselves clueless *in medias res*, thrown back on their own resources, as if subjected to a wilderness-survival test" (231), she points out exciting features of this strange terrain: for example, that *Milton* is perhaps unique in presenting a "poet as protagonist and title character. In European literature there are parallels of sorts, but no precedents" (231). She links the poem to earlier works such as *The Marriage* and Blake's biography—noting, for example, that his "all-out commitment to artistic independence upon returning to London in 1803" led to a "precipitous drop, after 1806, in commercial employment and an astonishing upsurge in creative productivity" (235). She skillfully elucidates the poem's relation to *Paradise Regained* and displays how it is built upon informed challenges to major theological doctrines of atonement and salvation, in particular Calvinist predestination. These are issues of interest to few readers today, but Johnson enables us to grasp their role in Blake's strange structuring of his brief epic that develops his essential insight of *Paradise Lost* as less "a prophecy of liberation" than a "'history' of the restraint of desire" (234), and why that insight has relevance not only to social, political, and ethical concerns of Blake's time but even to our own. She understands, as few recent literary critics seem to, that Blake's purpose really was "to change lives, so that through those changed lives a nation and a world may be redeemed" (247). This is why his "self-representation as a prophetic visionary is more than a rhetorical device eliciting ordinary literary-critical responses." As she rightly observes, "we resist poetry that, in Keats's words, 'has a palpable design on us,' especially—in an academic setting—words of 'eternal salvation.'" But we can only understand *Milton* if we are willing "to suspend disbelief in the soul-saving rhetoric of lower-class evangelistic Protestantism" (247). So she judges that

Blake paid a high personal price for his Decade-of-Milton achievements. Yet in choosing Art over Mammon, he made an excellent bargain. To the adoring young artists who brightened his impoverished later years, he was a model of cheerful industry; and he died ... singing songs of his own composition, with the light of vision burning in his eyes. To seek that inspiration, even today, is the best reason for reading Blake at all. (247-48)

The sequence of my remarks reverses the book's proper ordering of Essick's and Johnson's essays because her style and angle of attack better introduce my comments on David Simpson's essay "Blake and Romanticism," which focuses on Blake's place in academic criticism of romanticism of the past sixty years. Ironically, by its very judicious intelligence (and many shrewd and thoughtful observations), Simpson's essay occasionally obscures what are to me (who was very much

engaged in the event) some significant features in the history of Blake's emergence as a major figure of romanticism. These issues are too big for a review, and perhaps I can later in this journal or elsewhere offer the fuller commentary that Simpson's valuable article deserves. Here I suggest its importance by indicating summarily aspects of it that to me especially call for some qualification or extended development.

Simpson is I think mistaken in suggesting that before the late 1950s Blake was one of the six major romantic figures. Although the books of Frye and Erdman gave crucial boosts to interest in Blake, he was rarely included in university courses on romanticism, especially in Ivy League institutions, and never taught in high schools until the sixties. The first graduate seminar in Blake at the University of Wisconsin was I believe offered by me at the beginning of the sixties (followed by the first and only graduate seminar offered anywhere on Blake and Jane Austen, the first writers to make internalization their central concern). In fact, the conventional romantic gang of six Simpson claims for the early fifties was then really three, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, with grudging admissions that Shelley had participated. Byron was almost as ignored as Blake, although his worldwide fame and influence (he remains the only British poet besides Shakespeare generally known outside the anglophone world), and the never-flagging fascination with his life, producing about a biography a year since his death, required dismissive comment—much of it, like that of Abrams and Bloom, ludicrous. The only biographer fifty years ago who had dug out the truth about Byron, Leslie Marchand, was prevented from publishing it by descendants of John Murray (publisher's revenge!). Most interestingly, when Marchand began in the sixties spilling the beans about Lord B's multiple sexuality (bi- seems inadequate; as Carl Woodring put it, you might think twice about asking him to hold your horse), nobody was much interested—we hadn't yet begun stripping for the action of *our* sexual revolution. (Some British scholars still seem antsy about Byron's sexual vitality.) The modern critical reputations of Blake and Byron are mutually illuminating—as Blake foresaw in his *Death of Abel*, recognizing in *Cain* of 1822 (the fulcrum on which *Don Juan* pivots) a parallel contempt for a pretense of religion to destroy religion that animates his *Milton*.

Blake in fact became a canonized member of the romantic politburo in the twentieth century before Byron, although official recognition did not come (after some hard fighting) until his first inclusion in the MLA volume *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research*, 4th edition (1985—mostly completed two years earlier). The complexity involved in the reconfiguring around 1960 of who was a big-wheel romantic poet requires extended elucidating, but one feature is suggested by prime movers in the Blake explosion being Northrop Frye, David Erdman, and Harold Bloom. I would be hard pressed to name three individuals more distinct in background, personality, and critical orientation, yet they were united by revolutionary fervor—Erdman's edition superseded

ing Keynes', for example, could accommodate Bloom's interpretive commentaries. Each was (and Bloom still is) an enthusiast. And their enthusiasm is not to be separated from their strong responsiveness toward the religious. Frye was ordained as what I would call a protestant and what Simpson would call a dissenting minister. Bloom had no need of such entitlement, since his voice has always been difficult to distinguish from Yahweh's own. Erdman might be called anti-Christian, since he was an engaged leftist (unlike baby-boomer theoretical Marxists), one who suffered professionally and financially for practicing his convictions. In the light of his ultimate fascination with Blakean texts, his most intriguing publication was a pamphlet he wrote for labor organizers on how to set up a printing press.

Erdman reminds us that a deep concern with religion does not require one to be either a believer or a communicant—witness Voltaire, or Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and I think an enthusiasm entwined with sensitivity to religious impulses fired the romantic criticism which morphed Blake into a major poet. Simpson is correct that Frye's 1947 *Fearful Symmetry* and Bloom's subsequent *Blake's Apocalypse* present Blake's art as transcending historical periodizing, offering insight into transhistorical "poetic genius." Blake released in both Frye and Bloom their full power as critics. Such responsiveness was typical in their time. David Erdman found in Blake a means to realize his oddly organized/disorganized talents as his political commitments had not permitted. Study of Blake's art demands finally scholarship, not mere criticism. And Erdman was the first significantly to link Blake to American literature and politics of his time, into which, as Tom Paine illustrates, religion, pro or con, invariably intruded. Most of us who were graduate students and young faculty in those years were enthused; we had a gospel Simpson misses: to overthrow the evil critical empire of academically entrenched modernism. Our enemies were Eliot, Pound, and Ransom-Tate conservatives, all Babbitts (the Harvard species, but Irving is the flip side of Sinclair Lewis' unintellectual protagonist). We reacted against the modernists' reaction against what they called romanticism, which we regarded (correctly, it so happens) as a factitious falsification. In so doing, although we were not aware of it, we were originating post-modernism—whose self-conscious beginnings at the same moment are now always identified with architects of the early sixties like Philip Johnson.

Simpson is right to puzzle over whether romanticists of that era were focused on the 1789-1832 period or with a conception of romanticism as articulating something fundamental to the "poetic spirit." We were doing both—seeing in the transient moment of English romanticism an historical revelation of the imaginative potency all true poetry releases. Hence criticism of that era is marked by the kind of exuberance displayed by Mary Lynn Johnson in her essay on *Milton*. The notable absence of such exuberance from criticism of the past two decades may be connected to the loss of interest in impulses that animate religiosity. Deconstructionists, New Historicists, et al.

do not take seriously (as my generation did) Blake's claim that religion originates in poetic imagining. The claim parallels young Wordsworth's subtler argument for the foundation of spiritual impulses in reciprocal engagements with our natural environment—what is offered, for example, by a vernal wood. Our concern was more than compatible with intense skepticism, as it had been for Byron, Shelley, and Keats (and Germany's great romantic, Kleist, Paul de Man's secret idol). This was the foundation for our understanding of romantic self-reflexivity: by rigorously applying skepticism to itself one uncovers unappreciated powers of the human mind.

Parallelism between the later romantics and Blake is remarkable, as is revealed by the late fascination of all three with Dante, and their astonishingly penetrating insights into his achievements—far beyond Eliot's superficial comments. Blake has none of Shelley's superb *terza rima*, nor Byron's grasp of Dante's socio-historical situation, but his illustrations are theologically acute. That perspicacity is relevant to his ascension in the sixties, when of course there was much false and silly vaporizing about "spirituality," but also some valuable analyses by theologically informed scholars, such as Altizer—not inappropriately, since the hermeneutics fundamental to all modern criticism (even McGann's) originated in romantic Protestant biblical studies. Protestantism may explain why Blake's literary canonizing was mainly the work of North Americans. English contributions have been secondary and derivative—a reminder that since the death of Byron and Blake the most significant poets in the anglophone tradition from Whitman and Dickinson to Walcott have not been English: the literary empire was the first to crumble.

I hope these personal comments on Simpson's excellent article suggest the most attractive aspect of the *Companion* as a whole: it proves that much is still to be explored in Blake's art, and that directly confronting its difficulties is the best way to experience the uniqueness of his exhilarating prophetic accomplishments.