



Karen Mulhallen, ed. *Blake in Our Time: Essays in Honour of G. E. Bentley Jr.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xvi + 300 pp.; 51 illus. \$65.00/£45.99, hardcover.

Reviewed by Joseph Wittreich

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- 1 **B**LAKE in *Our Time* is a magnificent tribute to G. E. Bentley, Jr.—one of the titans in Blake studies of the last, as well as current, century—whose work has “shifted the focus of Blake criticism from formalism and symbolism to the ‘Minute Particulars’ of Blake’s life and work,” with

Bentley thus launching what is here described as “now the most productive field of inquiry in Blake studies” ([3]). Were the title not already in service, this anthology might better be called *Blake in His Time* inasmuch as its core chapters fix attention on Blake’s friends, patrons, and fellow artists: Stephen and Harriet Mathew, John Flaxman, William Hayley, Thomas Butts, George Cumberland, and George Richmond. On the other hand, the title as we have it drives the idea that a principal activity of Blake studies in our time is the *re-situation* of the poet in his own time and, with that, the rehabilitation of text and context. Even more, the title underscores the paradox that the preoccupation of Blake studies in our time is with Blake in his own time; that only after we return Blake to his original cultural context does he emerge as a poet speaking powerfully to our own age from a frontier of religious speculation and through an ideology that has survived its own apparent demise. Among the many outstanding essays in this volume, those by Robert N. Essick, Mary Lynn Johnson, Martin Butlin, and Morton D. Paley are especially illuminating, while the coda, by Jerome McGann, holds its own bright light in Bentley’s sunshine.

- 2 No one has made the case more compellingly (nor more dramatically) than Essick for “the importance of preserving each original copy of Blake’s writings” ([19]). By Essick’s account, believing that it had six duplicate prints from *There is No Natural Religion*, the Pierpont Morgan Library, deciding to hold on to several of the originals, sold off its duplicates. It was the luck of the buyers (one of whom was Essick) that the duplicates were all originals, and the Morgan’s embarrassment that what it held on to were all facsimiles. This “gotcha” moment is a reminder that, among bibliophiles, there has been a “mutual interchange” (28) between collecting and scholarship in which, in the instance of the celebrated and the celebrant, Bentley no less than Essick, the savvy of the collector combines with a heightened critical intelligence to produce scholarship of the first magnitude.
- 3 Among the other essays, three are of signal importance. In her assiduous sorting through of online archives entitled “More on Blake’s (and Bentley’s) ‘White Collar Maecenas’: Thomas Butts, His Wife’s Family of Artisans, and the Methodist Withams of St. Bartholomew the Great,” Mary Lynn Johnson takes as her subject Thomas Butts, about whom relatively little is known and some of what is known is manifestly untrue—for example, Butts’s religious views, as well as his “take” on the Bible. The rich yield of this essay is a finely particularized, well-shaded portrait and “an enriched contextual understanding of Blake’s friend, patron, and principal collector” (133). In the renewed attention that Martin Butlin gives to the “Ancients”—those young artists who eventually gathered around Blake, including

Samuel Palmer, Edward Calvert, John Linnell, and George Richmond—especially “the close interaction between these artists” (204), this eminent art historian crafts a credible argument for Richmond as Blake’s chief heir, even as he notes intriguingly that, with one possible exception, Richmond avoids repeating biblical subjects painted by Blake, yet also produces work that is both “a distillation of late Blake” and indebted to his “visionary inspiration” (208).

- 4 Morton Paley’s “William Blake and Chichester” is the most interesting and important essay in this collection. Arguing that “it is time to reconsider the role of Chichester in Blake’s life, both material and imaginative” ([215]), Paley illuminates a series of relationships (each of them owing something to William Hayley) with Joseph Seagrave, John Marsh, Richard Dally, and John Weller, as well as more tenuous relationships with John Peachey, William Brereton, and John Quantock, all of whom “appear in *Jerusalem* among the Giant Sons of Albion” (218). More strikingly, Paley recaptures and credits Thomas Wright’s earlier apprehension that “the original model for Blake’s city of the imagination, Golgonooza . . . , the foundations of his four-gated city lay in Chichester,” especially its structures of the marketplace, the cathedral, and the guildhall (219). “What Blake saw in Chichester,” Paley concludes, “became part of the major transition in [his] aesthetics . . . , of which the ogee arch and the idea of the Gothic constituted important parts, along with the architectonics of Golgonooza” (227).
- 5 If these four essays are mountain peaks in *Blake in Our Time*, while others from their hilltops transmit repeated flashes of insight, the collection as a whole reinforces Bentley’s literalistic, yet always eloquent, documentation of the Miltonic thundering that the poet is himself a true poem: “His life is more than an illumination of his own poetry It bears the shape of great art itself!”¹ To the extent that these essays replicate Bentley’s own move from interpretation in his early years to the historical particularity of his later works, they should not be misconstrued as necessarily signaling a move beyond interpretation. Rather, they participate in a historicism into which interpretation is enfolded. Indeed, some would seem to signal a next move for Blake studies in the attention they (at times) give to Blake’s own writings on art (Joyce H. Townsend and Bronwyn A. Ormsby), to Blake as an archetypal romantic poet (David Bindman) and defining figure of romanticism, to his (and his age’s) experimental writings (Keri Davies), to their creation of new forms of literary illustration (Mark Crosby), to

Blake’s visionary imagination (Butlin), to the uncaging of the human spirit and “drawing aside of the fleshly curtain” (Butlin, quoting Samuel Palmer, [201]). These essays, then, selectively gesture beyond poetry to poetics, indeed toward Blake as the founder of a new poetics to which Marjorie Perloff has recently given stunning articulation.

- 6 In so many ways a harbinger of things to come, Blake anticipates a poetics of “unoriginal genius” to which Charles Bernstein, in Perloff’s account, gives more recent definition: “I love originality so much I keep copying it.”² Long before, Blake avers: “The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal.”³ Blake then produces a poetry in which the thick clusterings of allusion collage into sequences and collide within contexts that, here invoked by picture and there by word, are themselves zones of contention. Continually interacting with those (often shifting) contexts and in the process often modifying them, Blake’s poetry, written at the borders of coherence and constantly testing its limits, time and again shatters into fragments and, defeating expectations, creates cognitive dissonance. In the process, Blake’s poems, interacting not only with external contexts but with one another, witness the transformation of their own content and the modification of their own myths. As their altering eye beholds the dissolution of usual structures of perception, the poet, gaining perspective on his own cultural moment, mounts a critique of it. It would be a mistake, however, to infer from the aforementioned essays that Blake studies, pendulum-like, has swerved from interpretation to history, from criticism to biography. Rather, Blake studies has taken the form of an ascending spiral, with G. E. Bentley, Jr., overseeing one rotation and thus leaving an important phase signed with his honor. It is in his “art”—“it is in the glories of sight and sound, in the divine vision preserved in time of trouble,” says Bentley, “that Blake lives for us most truly.”⁴

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., speaking of Blake, in *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) xxvi.

2. Marjorie Perloff (quoting Bernstein) in *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 1.

3. Blake, “Annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed., ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor–Random House, 1988) 645.

4. Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise* xxv, xxvi.