Naomi Billingsley, *The Visionary Art of William Blake: Christianity, Romanticism and the Pictorial Imagination*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018. Pp. xxiii + 246. £70.00. ISBN 9780567694171.

Naomi Billingsley's *The Visionary Art of William Blake* begins with a series of claims that elegantly sum up Blake's complex religious beliefs in relation to his visual representations of the figure of Christ: for Blake, Christianity, as it is properly practiced, is a form of art, and Christ, 'the model and the source of artistic activity', is the artist because he changes 'the way that we perceive the world' (1). Christ (Billingsley prefers this to 'Jesus' to distinguish his role within Blake's mythos from the biblical figure) thus provides a fitting organising principle for this study, which offers a rewarding analysis of Blake's visual idiolect.

Billingsley's investigation of Blake's visual approach builds on the work of a series of pre-eminent Blakeans, including Anthony Blunt, David Bindman, Martin Butlin, and Morris Eaves. Yet the detailed and intuitive close readings of Blake's imagery in this work provide a fresh prism through which to view Blake's output. Indeed, the angle from which Billingsley observes Blake's oeuvre has the effect of rearranging the landscape, as familiar works shift into the background to make way for a lesser studied set of texts. The introduction situates Blake within a Romantic tradition of visual art and notes the influence of James Barry and Benjamin West on Blake's 'intensely audience-centred approach to art' (12). This critical insight then acts as the throughline for the book.

In chapters 1 and 2, Billingsley explores a series of Christ-centred works completed in the second half of the 1790s and suggests it was then that Blake first began to engage extensively with images of Christ. For Billingsley, there is therefore the significant implication that the Christological 'conversion' long recognised as the innovation of Blake's later prophecies, *The Four Zoas* (ca.1796–1807), *Milton: A Poem* (ca.1804–11) and *Jerusalem* (1804–ca.1820), began in the visual realm before migrating to the poetic. Chapter 1 focuses in on the 'regenerative' capacity Blake ascribes to his art, in which a painting becomes 'a space in which the viewer can participate, and in which a rebirth or resurrection can take place' (27). Centred primarily on Blake's illustrations for an abortive edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, Billingsley argues against reading the images as a sustained critique of the poem as others have done. Rather, she discerns in Blake's representations of Christ a 'creative conflict' (34) with Young's rationalist religion, which sees Blake 'regenerate' Young's poem via '"corrective" interpretation' (59). Chapter 2 then considers depictions of the inspirational Christ that appears in the tempera paintings commissioned by Blake's generous patron Thomas Butts in 1799–1800. For Billingsley, these paintings locate the Christ of the nativity as the source of a prophetic embodiment available to all humankind, which Blake calls in his poetry the 'Divine Humanity'.

Chapter 3 analyses the series of watercolours Blake produced for Butts in 1800–6 and reads scenes from Jesus' public ministry by way of Morris Eaves' suggestion that Blake's conception of his relationship with his audience was intended to engender a 'Society of Imagination' (90). Billingsley thus convincingly argues that the seemingly impassive Jesus of these designs is intended to act upon his audience both within and outside of the paintings to trigger an imaginative response that sees the viewer become, as Billingsley puts it, the 'exemplar' of artistic activity (91). The fourth chapter then opens with one of the most difficult periods in Blake's life: his disastrous one-man exhibition of 1809. The descriptive catalogue for the exhibition sets out more explicitly than perhaps anywhere else in his oeuvre Blake's theoretical framework for his artistic approach. Though it mentions Jesus only briefly, Billingsley contends that these references confirm 'Christ as the source of that which the exhibition seeks to restore' (134). This is Christ, the eternal Human Form Divine, as the creator God. In one of the most sustained and compelling passages in the book, Billingsley then argues

that Blake uses the illustrations of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to 'Christologise' (135) Milton's representation of a paternalistic God, redeeming the poet from error as Blake had Young, by reimagining his vision of Christ. The final chapter turns to Blake's iconoclastic representations of the crucifixion, in which Billingsley observes a correspondence between Blake's own iconoclastic methods and his belief that Christ's death was an act of what Blake termed 'self-annihilation', the casting off of a self-absorbed selfhood, just as Blake approached his own end in the 1820s.

Many key concepts from Blake's sprawling mythology are recast from the perspective of his visual output in Billingsley's thought-provoking and pleasurably lucid book, making it essential reading for those still grappling with the peculiar nature of Blake's composite art.

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