

Mark Crosby, Troy Patenaude and Angus Whitehead, eds., *Re-Envisioning Blake*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012. Pp. 262. £50. ISBN 9780230275515.

Andrew M. Cooper, *William Blake and the Productions of Time*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 348. £70. ISBN 9781409444411.

Re-Envisioning Blake, the editors note, grew from 'Blake at 250,' a conference held at the University of York in 2007. The blurb and 'Introduction' celebrate the eclectic nature of contemporary Blake studies, and the book stretches from the historical study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture to the survey of 'new methodological approaches' – embracing questions of radicalism, politics, patronage, aesthetics, religion, environmentalism and posthumous influence. To welcome a multifarious Blake is to pay attention to the 'Minute Particulars' (2) of the artist's life, work and legacy, and *Re-Envisioning Blake* shows how Blake thrives not because he is definable but because he is uncontainable.

The editors begin by noting that 'hermeneutical, historical, and bibliographical traditions' have characterised Blake criticism in recent decades, and that these have become 'increasingly interdependent' (3) – a situation that accounts for the 'eclecticism and creativity' (7) of Blake studies. The reader comes away from the book enriched and energised by the openness of the Blake industry; by its embrace of questioning and exploration, and the way it preserves the spirit of an artist who knew that opposition was necessary, but founded the possibility of friendship.

The collection begins with an illuminating discussion between two leading historicists, Saree Makdisi and Jon Mee. They debate the paradoxes surrounding Blake's relationship to 'hegemonic radicalism,' 'Orientalism' and 'subjectivity' (13) in the late eighteenth century. What emerges is a vivid sense both of Blake's historical positioning, and of how he matters in a contemporary context that lives out his ideological matrix. Makdisi reminds us that the 'consolidation of ... bourgeois individualism' in the Romantic period was a 'cornerstone of modern political culture,' and was continuous with the consolidation of 'modern imperialism' (15). Blake's rejection of the 'Self' versus the 'Other' explains his repudiation of Orientalism because the latter is predicated on 'individualism ... [in] opposition to otherness' (16). Blake must be distinguished from the radicalism of his day, not least because he dissents from the 'mantra-like attacks on Islam that absolutely saturate 1790s radical writing' (21). Makdisi's recognition of Blake's 'open God' (24) in 'The Divine Image' of *Songs of Innocence* resonates with Mee's insistence that Blake 'cast[s] off ... the sovereign subject in favour of mutually constructed forms of social being' (27). No better argument could be made for the relevance of Blake to our own ideological conjuncture.

Keri Davies and David Worrall note at the start of Chapter 2 that the closing plenary discussion of 'Blake at 250' evidenced antagonism between 'historicist' and 'hermeneutic' (30) approaches. Some suggested Blakean historicism muffled Blakean interpretation. This is arguable when it comes to the empirical-archival imperatives directing the award of research monies, but the evidence of this book is that hermeneutics is alive and well. Davies and Worrall argue, following from Davies's signal discovery of Blake's Moravian heritage, that to place Blake within the traditions of religious dissent needs revision. Pointing to a latitudinarian impulse in Moravian spirituality, they propose an 'ecumenical Blake' (47): a Blake who needs interpretation as much as historicization. Craig D. Atwood in Chapter 9 offers a crisp characterization of the Moravian 'spirituality ... his mother would have learned in Fetter Lane, and hence may have possibly influenced Blake' (160): a spirituality that used feminine imagery for the Godhead, promoted sacramental sexuality and celebrated the bodily

Christ. Atwood links the Fetter Lane Moravians' view that a 'woman's body was a sacred temple' to the sketch on the manuscript of *Vala, or The Four Zoas* of 'a woman's vagina as a cathedral': is this 'pornography critical of the church' (171), he wonders, or sacralised sexuality? Hermeneutics remains.

The historicist impulse yields rich rewards in Andrew Lincoln's reading of *America a Prophecy* in Chapter 4. Lincoln draws attention to the way *America* folds repressive and liberatory histories together. 'Orc' is shown to be an ambivalent figure who embodies political liberty and colonial domination, and Lincoln's reading releases the historical indeterminacy of Orc as a revolutionary and oppressive figure. Hermeneutics is in the ascendant in essays on Blake's illustrations from the Bible for Thomas Butts by John E. Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson; the political and cultural legacy of Blake in essays by Shirley Dent on the lyric 'Jerusalem,' Troy Patenaude on environmentalism and Jason Whittaker on Blake's "'reactivat[ion]" through reappropriation' (208); and historical recovery in essays by Susan Matthews on Blake's links with Benjamin Heath Malkin, and by Mark Crosby and Angus Whitehead on Blake's wife, Catherine Boucher. An 'Afterword' by Morris Eaves muses on 'past, present, and future Blakes' (226) – in sum, *Re-Envisioning Blake* presents a Blake who, at 250, is still journeying on.

William Blake and the Productions of Time is a very different book. The blurb hints at an anti-historical approach – 'Cooper locates the action of William Blake's major Illuminated Books in the ahistorical present' – but this is misleading. There is a formalist strain in the study, but Cooper links it to attention to Blake's revisionary relationship with literary and cultural antecedents and contemporaries – most notably, his appropriation of eighteenth-century 'theories of vision and matter' (250) for visionary or prophetic purposes. The 'Conclusion' of the book contends that '[r]ecent attempts to set Blake in the context of his times ... put [...] him in his place by ignoring his performative ironies' (316), and for Cooper this means historicization risks stifling the 'performative' challenge of Blake's work: a challenge that brings transformation and emancipation to the reader's perceptual horizons and boundaries. Cooper says he wants to 'carry on the attempt to locate Blake within philosophical, literary, and scientific history,' but wishes to 'marry historicism with a reader-response type of performativity' (15). This involves a phenomenology of reading in which the interpreter finds his or her canons of sense mutated, transfigured and opened out by the formal-structural ironies of Blakean text and image. Such ironies disallow hermeneutic closure – in Cooper's terms, they open up 'Eternity'. He takes his title from Plate 7 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 'Eternity is in love with the productions of time' – and this insistence on interdependency suggests that the 'productions of time' exceed temporal limitations. It would be unfair to see Cooper's apologia for Blakean 'Eternity' as rhapsodic, metaphysical, enthusiastic: when he says that Blake rejects the 'progressive, stadial concept of history' (9) of his contemporaries he echoes Makdisi's argument in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* that Blake repudiates progressive, linear history in the name of a multi-dimensional temporality. Blake, then and now, calls for a transformation of historical vision.

At the level of hermeneutics, Cooper argues Blake's ironies are 'performative' by creating a space in which the reader steps out of self into vision. Against Wordsworth's call for the reader's identification with the poetic subjects of *Lyrical Ballads*, Cooper says that Blake's *Songs* demand 'self-annihilation,' 'deliverance into ... intersubjective reality' (51) – they are injunctions to self-transformation. In a commentary on *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, he speaks of 'Oothoonian self-annihilation' (109) – for, in her paean to 'sense,' Oothoon hymns the 'pleasure ... [of] interplay between eye and object' (115), abandoning self in an opening to the other. Cooper argues that, beyond the *Songs*, Blake seeks a 'more diachronic form for organizing the shifting imagery' of his texts than the lyrics allow, and he

finds this in the ‘conceptual metaphor of the Vortex’ (164). Cooper cites the passage from *Milton* Plate 15 on the ‘nature of infinity’ – that ‘every thing has its/Own Vortex,’ and to travel ‘thro’ Eternity’ (195) is to pass through vortices, exceeding them and seeing them roll behind, folding into a globe. In the body of Cooper’s book, the ‘Vortex’ becomes a metaphor for provisional perceptual containment giving way to liberation – vortices are way stations in an ‘eternal’ pilgrimage. As an engine of mental and temporal transformation, the ‘Vortex’ is a figure of constraint and emancipation – Blake’s demigod of limitation, ‘Urizen,’ is triumphant only when ‘individuals mistake the Vortex of becoming for a fixed horizon’ (216). One of Cooper’s chapters is titled, ‘Freedom from *The Book of Urizen*’.

Both these books give us a Blake who belongs to history – but it is a history that is ours and is now.

Steve Vine
Swansea University